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A TWO-DAYS' DRAMA

BY

THE HON. MRS. WALTER R. D. FORBES
(NÉE FARWELL) Evelyn Louisa
AUTHOR OF BLIGHT, A GENTLEMAN, DUMB, ETC.

L.C.

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PROLOGUE

"The past is as a story told."

THE sun was sinking slowly towards the mountains, and as it sank, an ever-deepening red light stole through the mellow rays which shed a golden glow upon the distant snows, and flung itself in reckless prodigality upon the vivid crimson and yellow of the trees that clustered thickly upon the nearer hills. Above, the sky was densely, vividly blue, yet even in the warm light of the setting sun not a tone seemed garish, nor a tint too crude. A rough pathway led downward from the wooded hills to the rustic bridge that crossed a little dancing stream, and beyond the stretch of grass which bordered it ran a straight white road, its hard and dazzling surface accentuated sharply against the medley of soft tints in turf and woods through which the sun-shafts thrust their lengthening rays.

Upon the bridge stood a girl, so slight of build and slender of form that it seemed the mass of golden hair, coiled loosely beneath her big white hat, must have been put up too soon. She stood looking down into the rippling water of the shallow stream as it gurgled and eddied about an occasional stone, which it made feint of regarding as a boulder, set there in midstream to stay its course; the drooping brim of her hat shaded both face and eyes, but the soft contours of cheek and chin seemed lacking in the characteristic curves that come with womanhood.

Suddenly a short, quick step rang out upon the road behind her: she turned quickly, and as she did so the soft evening breeze caught the brim of her hat, raising it lightly from the little curls about her forehead, leaving the great blue eyes unshaded, save for their long black lashes. The eyes were those of a trusting child, yet within their depths lay a shadow, near akin to fear.

The quick steps came on down the road; the girl went forward to meet them: as she did so the sharp, staccato accents of a thin French voice called out to her in greeting:

"Ah, mademoiselle, I thought I should find you here. Already, you see, I know your tastes!"

The girl turned and looked towards the mountains. "I wanted air—and he was asleep," she said, and she sighed.

The Frenchman sighed also, a clearly emphasised, quite unmistakable sigh.

"Ah! He sleeps!" he ejaculated, and he rubbed his thin, brown hands quickly, nervously, together as he spoke.

A sudden life leapt into the shrinking fear in the girl's eyes: quickly she came forward.

"You—you think that is not good?" she cried, "but surely sleep is always, *must* always be good. Every one always tells us that." Her words seemed to thrust away a dread, yet her tones were trembling beneath its unacknowledged weight.

The man's light, bead-like brown eyes did not meet hers.

"I—do not know," he said slowly. "There are many kinds of sleep. There is the sleep of convalescence which refreshes, recuperates—there is also the sleep of ex-

haustion, when one sleeps, and sleeps—and sinks."

She turned to him swiftly, and her slim fingers clutched his sleeve.

"What do you mean?" she cried, and her voice was tense with pain. "What do you know? He was sleeping when I came here, only a few moments ago—what——"

He interrupted her.

"Forgive me, *chère mademoiselle*," he said quickly, and he laid his hand on hers; "I have perhaps taken a liberty, but I had to-day to go into Lucerne upon a little matter of business, and then, what will you? one cannot forget one's friends—I thought of you—of your sorrow—your anxiety—your aloneness. I said, 'Is there nothing I can do?' and then, in an instant, I remembered that there, but a street or two distant, lived the great English doctor, and I said 'I will bring him to her father, and perhaps he will cure him and she will be glad.'"

The girl's hands were clasped about his arm, and her eyes were full of tears.

"Ah, you are good—good," she said brokenly. "You brought him? He is

here?" Her hands loosed their clasp and she stood as if poised for flight.

"He is here," the man said slowly, and his voice was dull and cold.

The girl's eager glance swept over his face, but the alert eyes were lowered, and the sharp line of the thin lips was hidden by a carefully waxed moustache. "Has he seen him?" she asked, and her voice sank into a whisper.

The man made a gesture of assent.

"And you did not call me," she cried, and she darted forward towards the little wayside inn that nestled at the foot of the great hill facing them. Yet but a few steps had she taken when she wheeled suddenly upon her heel, and running back to where the man still stood, she once more laid both hands insistently upon his sleeve.

"Why, *why?*" she asked, "I cannot understand." A dumb misery filled her eyes. The man did not meet her look: his quick glance turned towards the house.

"I—hoped I might have had good news for you," he said.

For an instant she stood quite still, her

hands still clasped upon his arm, her eyes fixed intently upon his face. Then, suddenly, a low, shuddering moan broke from her.

"You hoped," she said, "*hoped*, and now —oh, it cannot, *cannot* be true," and with the swift movement of a startled bird she flitted across the grass and roadway and disappeared within the rustic porch of the inn.

The man looked after her.

"The face of an angel," he said slowly; "a man seeing her would think himself in heaven, and—even should he find himself in hell, if he but saw her there, he would think it still." His voice dragged with sinister emphasis upon the words, and a sarcastic smile curled the corners of his thin lips. He turned and, retracing his footsteps, stood upon the bridge from which the girl had watched the sinking sun. It lay close behind the mountains now, and a dull red gleam fell like a pathway along the little stream as it bubbled beneath the rough planks of the rustic bridge.

It did not seem, however, that the man cared for sunsets. He drew a flat silver case from his pocket, and selecting a cigarette,

lighted it carefully. The light rings of smoke curled gaily, gracefully upward; as he watched them he smiled again.

"Angels are valuable assets," he remarked; "there are still people who believe in them."

. . . . . .

Within a little, low-roofed room of the inn a man lay with closed eyelids upon a narrow bed. His thin grey hair lent no softness to the sharp outline of his profile; refined, emaciated, absolutely still, it seemed a mask of ivory upon the whiteness of the pillow slip. Beside the bed stood another man, of medium height and comfortable stoutness, his eyes intently fixed upon its occupant. Suddenly he turned, as light footfalls sounded on the wooden stair in headlong haste: at the door they paused, but for an instant only, then, softly, quickly, the handle turned and within the frame of the doorway stood the girl who had watched the sunset from the bridge.

The doctor bowed and came towards her.

"I am here by the request of M. Dubosc," he said. "He thought that it might be a sat-

isfaction to you for an English doctor to see your father."

"A—satisfaction," she stammered. "It was my one longing, my hope, my prayer, but I did not know what to do, I had no m—no friends—I did not know what to do." Again her lips trembled piteously.

"But you have a friend, you see," the doctor said kindly, "M. Dubosc has fulfilled your wish."

"Ah, yes, yes," she cried quickly. "It was good, wonderful of him. He hardly knows us, you see, and I never dreamt—" She did not finish her sentence; her eyes had fallen upon the long, lean fingers that lay upon the snow-white quilt: they were moving, curving upwards, forwards, backwards, plucking at the cotton of the sheets.

With a quick, terrified movement she caught at the doctor's sleeve.

"You can save him?" she said, and a deadly fear rang in the low, beseeching tones, "you can, you *will* save him?"

Very gently the doctor took her hands in his.

"He has done with men, and with the

aid of men," he said slowly, "we must leave him in God's hands."

A low moan broke from her, and she fell upon her knees beside the bed. Suddenly the eyes of the dying man opened; the fingers ceased their nervous plucking at the quilt, and slowly, feebly, found their way to the soft golden curls from which the great white hat had fallen.

"My darling, my own darling child," the weak voice murmured tenderly.

Then the girl broke down utterly. "Daddy, daddy, dear daddy, it's not, it can't be true. You won't leave me, will you, darling? you must, you *will* get well."

The eyes of the dying man turned to where the doctor stood. "In—the hands of God," he said, and the heavy eyelids closed.

A shuddering cry broke from the girl as she cowered beside the bed, but the doctor's firm, kindly hand was on her shoulder, putting her gently to one side. In the other hand he held a glass. Quickly, dexterously, he raised the sick man's head and poured a few drops of the liquid between the blue lips:

the tension of the face relaxed, and once more the eyelids lifted. "M. Dubosc?" he said enquiringly. The girl started. "M. Dubosc, daddy—you want him?"

"He—has been very kind," her father said slowly; "he would not let the people here turn us out, you know. He paid them and—" he broke off and glanced towards the doctor. When he spoke again his voice had gained a little strength; something of hope rang in its tone.

"He has promised to take care of you," he said.

The girl sprang to her feet. "He? M. Dubosc?" she cried.

"Who else, my dear?" her father answered. "We have no friends—I thought once that perhaps your godmother—but she is in America—I did not know where a letter would find her, and she was never my friend. It was—it was your mother she loved—every one loved her. But they had not met for years, and for me she never cared—why should she?" Again his eyes closed; again the doctor held the glass to his lips, and Alice, kneeling down beside the bed, chafed the

thin, cold hands lovingly. Presently he revived and continued.

"I wish I could have done more for you, my darling, but you know I never understood business and worldly things. She did it all: she knew everything on earth—and in heaven too, I think—I shall see her soon." A wonderful smile lit up the emaciated face as he spoke. Then he sighed, but there was no sadness in the sound: it was the sigh of one who knows that his day's work is ended and that he is nearing the haven where he would be.

"God will provide. May he bless and protect you, my child," he said tenderly, and he laid his hand once more upon the soft golden curls. Then his eyes sought the doctor's face. "M. Dubosc promised to arrange," he said. "He—" the weak voice quavered and broke; then the frail fingers crept to the girl's cheek, and tried to bring her face to his. She raised it quickly.

"What is it, daddy?" she cried.

The dying eyes looked closely into the living ones, so close to them and yet so far distant; for in this chamber of death, where

the man's eyes looked their last on life, the girl's eyes must see it for the first time alone.

"M. Dubosc loves you," he said. "He is kind, and you are all alone. Let him make you happy." His head fell back.

"Daddy!" the girl cried, "daddy!" but the doctor drew her away. "He cannot hear," he said.

HELEN DEERHAM

CHAPTER I

OLD FRIENDS

LONDON was wrapt in fog; not the dense yellow fog in which men and horses loom hideously vague, but in a grey darkness through which the trees of St. James's Park stretched skeleton arms towards the denser blackness posing as a sky. In the streets that intersect the lofty houses, the fog was thicker, darker, than where it stretched across the grass and twined about the grimy trees, but occasional gleams of light fell across the prevailing greyness from doors and windows, and close to a narrow passage leading from St. James's Place into the Park a distinct brightness radiated from a mansion whose windows looked full upon it.

"Well, I'm glad to see Deerham House opened again," Colonel Vivian remarked, as he and Lord Walter Stewart entered the pas-

sage. "It's been looking like a mausoleum for the last two years."

"Pretty much what it was," his companion answered. "The duchess buried her heart with that girl."

"Poor woman! I never saw mother and daughter so devoted," Colonel Vivian commented, "and poor Deerham was horribly cut up too."

"Yes; but he will get over it: he has still got his wife."

"And the wife has got her husband," Colonel Vivian retorted.

"Quite so; but capital fellow though he is, I can imagine a woman occasionally wanting a change of companionship."

"Yet she is the one woman of whom one has heard no histories," said Colonel Vivian.

"None; although from the time of her marriage—he married her out of the schoolroom, you know—she has held her place as one of the most beautiful women of her day, and the cleverest."

"Yes, that's true," Colonel Vivian said meditatively, "and I hope to goodness that she hasn't buried her head as well as her

heart. So many women have hearts, but you don't often find one with a head."

"Well, she has come back," said Lord Walter, and he turned and glanced over his shoulder at the mass of shadowy gloom which he believed to be Deerham House, "so since she has done that we may be quite sure that she means to take up her life again as if everything that made it life had not gone out of it. I've known her since she was a child. She's like David: so long as a thing is possible, she will work at it heart, head, soul, and body; when it isn't, she puts it on one side; shuts up the book as it were, puts it in her bookcase and turns the key. She does not forget that the book is there, nor what is in it mind you, but she doesn't look at it any more, that's all, and the world thinks she has forgotten."

"The world," said Colonel Vivian, and he spoke with conviction, "is a damned fool."

. . . . . .

Within the windows of Deerham House, meanwhile, electric light did its best to combat the insidious wisps of fog which, creeping

through a window chink here, and under a doorway there, contrived to dispose itself like grey tulle about the more distant objects in the large library where the Duke of Decrham, seated in a low arm-chair beside the fire, was reading the morning paper and manfully resisting an impulse to brush away the illusive cobwebs of fog that came between him and the printed page.

A tall and very graceful woman, of about thirty-four, was moving restlessly around the room, adjusting a flower here, an ornament there, taking up a book and putting it down again, opening a paper and folding it up again; it seemed that she desired, by sense of touch, to verify the existence of everything in the room, and the room contained many things. The immediate impression that it conveyed to a person who entered it for the first time was one of harmony. The dull green of its walls was very restful to the eye, the heavy Turkey carpet very soft beneath the foot, every chair and sofa had obviously been selected for their comfortable curves: books and papers lay upon tables within touch wherever one might chance to sit, and

upon other tables lay wonderful collections of bibelots, miniatures, enamels, medals, silver knick-knacks, and antique jewels. Flowers were everywhere; roses, violets, everything that was delicate and delicious, in season and out of season, and one small round table near the window held a gigantic copper bowl filled to overflowing with lilies-of-the-valley. The duchess pulled out half a dozen blossoms and pinned them in her gown.

"Oh, my dear Tom, how good it is to be at home again!" she exclaimed. "I can hardly believe we have been away for two whole years. Everything is so exactly the same, fog, flowers, everything!"

"Well, my dear, Nature never was changeable. Look at the time she takes to turn wood into coal!"

"Exactly; that's Nature's charm. It makes one feel so intimate with her: one always knows where one is. Now Art is perpetually surprising one—especially in coiffures! I wonder if any of my friends are faithful to their old tints," and with a sigh the duchess subsided on a Chesterfield sofa.

The duke put down his paper. The cob-

webs were becoming more and more aggressive. "I don't know anything about art," he said decidedly. "I never did; but if Nature is going to give us any more of this fog, I'm going to Monte Carlo."

"Good gracious, Tom! Why you only set foot in England the day before yesterday! Can't you stand your own country more than two days? I thought you called yourself a patriot!"

"Then you thought wrong, my dear. Patriots are all Irish."

The duchess laughed. "Well, you know what I mean: the sort of aggressive John Bull creature that you swell into the moment you leave your native land. Why, you ought to be delighted to see a fog again: you haven't seen one for two whole years, and it proves beyond a doubt that we really *are* at home again." So saying, she rose, and crossing over to the window, drew back one of the curtains, pushed aside the blind, and looked out into the park.

"Well, it's a proof that I could easily dispense with," said the duke. "Do draw that curtain."

His wife let the heavy folds of thick tapestry fall once more across the glass.

"All right, my dear, I have no time to argue with you: I have at least fifty letters to write, and not much more than fifty minutes to write them in, so *au revoir*," the duchess answered, and she turned towards a doorway that communicated by a short passage with an inner room.

As her fingers touched the handle, however, the door upon the farther side of the library opened, and the butler announced, "Sir Charles Davenant."

Quickly the duchess turned, and went towards the newcomer with both hands outstretched: the duke flung his paper on the floor—he enjoyed the chance this opportunity offered of treating the fog cobwebs with the contumely they deserved—and springing to his feet, he cried cheerily, "Hallo, Charlie! This is capital! I thought you were in Paris: George said so."

"And George was right," said the newcomer; a wiry little man with grey hair, a smooth-shaven face, and shrewd, kindly eyes.

"It's only a question of tense: I *was* in Paris, but I *am* here."

The duchess laughed. "So we see, and it is delightful of you to have found us at once."

"I came back on purpose," said Sir Charles. "Two years is too long to be parted from one's friends. Absence makes the heart grow quite too fond in twenty-four whole months."

"It *is* a long time," the duke remarked, and he stirred the fire reflectively.

"So it is," said his wife, and she resumed her seat upon the sofa and carefully settled a cushion at her back. "Do you know, Sir Charles, I really wonder you remember us."

Sir Charles shook his head. "Don't set a trap for me, duchess: I decline to pay you compliments—you would only scoff."

"Of course I should," she answered, laughing, "for after all time cannot change the face of a friend, and it's delightful to see you looking just exactly as you have looked ever since I have known you."

A slightly dubious expression crossed the smooth face; it appeared to Sir Charles that

the phrase admitted of two interpretations. The duke, however, interrupted.

"Pay no attention to her, Charlie," he said, "she has just addressed the very same words to the fog."

"Well, my dear Tom, you must allow that the fog is even an older and more familiar friend than Sir Charles. However, since you won't admire the fog and won't let me admire either of my old friends, I shall go and write my letters," and the duchess rose. "Of course Sir Charles will stay to luncheon, so if I let him talk to you before the meal, I trust you will graciously permit him to talk to me after it."

"But why write letters?" said Sir Charles as he opened the door for her.

"To avoid things even more tiresome than they," she answered. "I have to tell Lady Elderslie that I won't go to stay with her, and to break to Blanche Brentwater and a dozen others that nothing on earth will induce us to dine with them. Ridiculous creatures, to expect one to dine out as soon as one gets home, when one hasn't had a meal cooked by one's own servants for years. *A*

bientôt," and she vanished into the boudoir as Sir Charles closed the anteroom door.

"Have a cigar, Charlie," said the duke.

"Thanks," Sir Charles answered briefly, as he selected one from the box offered to him. The duke also took one and lighted it carefully: then he glanced towards the door that led into his wife's boudoir. "How do you think she is looking?" he asked anxiously.

Sir Charles blew a little cloud of smoke towards the ceiling. "Well, very well," he said emphatically, "and—" he hesitated and his voice sounded somewhat uncertain as he continued, "and she—seems to have recovered her spirits."

"Oh, that," said the duke, "that, you know, is just what one can never tell with Helen. She never lets you know what she feels like. Do you know, I have grown to think that when she laughs most in the morning she has been crying all night."

"By Jove!" Sir Charles commented. He felt glad that the duke had given him a cigar: Tom was really very thoughtful in some ways he reflected.

"You know," continued the duke, who appeared to find his friend's interjection eminently sympathetic, "I don't like all this fuss about being at home again. It's not like her. I—do you know, Charlie, it seems to me that she just puts it on to make me think she doesn't feel the blank."

"Poor thing!" said Sir Charles, "poor thing!"

The duke sighed. "They were always together: more like sisters than mother and daughter. Poor little Violet! she would have been nineteen this month."

"Yes, yes, so she would. Do you know, Tom, I was reminded of her in the most extraordinary fashion in Paris the other day. No real likeness, of course, and the most incongruous surroundings, but just that gentle way of moving about the room, and the soft voice."

"Like my Violet's?" said the duke, and his own voice sounded hoarse and uncertain, "like hers?"

"It might have been Violet speaking," said Sir Charles, "but there is a whole world of sin and sorrow between that girl's home

and what hers was," and he glanced round the room as he spoke.

"Who is she?" the duke queried: he was interested.

"The wife of a French *roué* who just hasn't gone under," Sir Charles answered.

"And she is not older than my girl would have been?" the Duke asked wonderingly.

Sir Charles knocked the ash from his cigar.

"I should say that, if anything, she is younger," he responded.

"How did you get to know her?" the duke inquired.

"D'Othmar introduced me. He admires her and—does not make love to her, which perhaps tells you what she is better than any description of mine can do."

"Well, yes, there must be something unique about a woman, young, lovely, and with a cypher husband, if d'Othmar admires her and—stops there."

"There *is* something unique about her," Sir Charles exclaimed, and he rose from his chair and stood beside the mantelpiece looking down at the duke as he spoke. "That

gentle, refined creature, with her great, innocent eyes, which she must have shut uncommonly tight to keep that look in them, ought to be in a bishop's palace. Instead of which, there she is, an appanage of Dubosc, treated by him as a mere pawn in his game, of which she has no more knowledge than the pawn would have. It—it's like putting those lilies in the coal-box," and Sir Charles waved his hand towards the copper bowl in which the lilies-of-the-valley stood.

"Hallo, Charlie! you rival d'Othmar," the duke exclaimed chaffingly.

"Well, and what if I do?" the little man answered testily; "I tell you it's the saddest thing I ever saw. That child with her white frock and her white face, gliding about like a spirit, through rooms full of cards and smoke and the talk bred of them; and all the time there's a dainty dignity about her which under the circumstances is very remarkable, and—er—fascinating." He turned abruptly from the mantelpiece and moved irritably about the room.

The duke glanced at him in lazy amusement.

"So it appears," he said drily.

The perturbed footsteps came to an abrupt standstill, and Sir Charles faced his host defiantly. "Now, look here, Deerham, it's all very well, but if you saw her you would be just as sorry for her as I am," he exclaimed, and a challenge rang in his voice.

The duke, however, did not take it up.

"Not a doubt of it, my dear fellow," he said idly. "But as I don't see her, what's the good of bothering? She has married this man, and—by the way, why *did* she marry him?"

"Circumstances and chicanery," Sir Charles responded briefly, and he once more took up his position by the mantelpiece and stared into the glowing coals. "It's a long story," he continued, "and a sad one."

The boudoir door opened and the duchess entered, a packet of letters in her hand.

"What is a sad story?" she queried.

Sir Charles turned quickly towards her.

"The history of a lovely girl I met the other day in Paris," he answered. "I was telling Tom about her, but he only jeers at me."

"He has no romance," said the duchess. "You shall tell your tale to me after luncheon."

A look of doubt puckered the little man's forehead.

"It is a sad story, duchess," he answered dubiously.

"All stories are sad when one understands them," she said, and she sighed. Sir Charles glanced at her quickly, and the duke stirred uneasily in his chair. With a little laugh the duchess moved away from them.

"I fear America has made me enigmatic," she said. "Let us go to luncheon."

CHAPTER II

TWO PORTRAITS

OPPOSITE the bow window of the dining-room at Deerham House hung a large and singularly attractive picture by a celebrated French artist. The background showed a country landscape, painted in some Southern country, it would appear, so deeply blue was the sky, so freshly, softly green the foliage of the trees, and of the grass and moss that clothed a sloping bank, below which ran a shallow, rippling brook. Upon the bank, poising herself delicately, carefully, stood a little girl about five years of age, clad in a dainty white frock, and with a great shady hat falling back from her golden curls. The little feet and legs were bare, and as the child balanced herself upon the bank and stretched the curling, rose-tipped toes of one small white foot towards the stream, her great blue eyes looked wonderingly at the water

as if asking whether its touch would be cold or kind. So faithfully had the artist interpreted the mingled trust and question in the child's eyes, that the picture appeared an allegory—the first step in life—and so exquisitely were the soft contours and delicate colourings portrayed, that it seemed as if air and sun and water all must love and caress a thing so fragile and so fair. The picture was a portrait of Violet Helen Wentworth, only child of Thomas Arlington, ninth duke of Deerham, and of Constance Helen, his wife. The artist had been right: she had been a thing too fragile for this workaday world, and eleven years after the picture was painted she had died.

Sir Charles Davenant gave a quick glance at the portrait as he took his seat at the luncheon table. Violet had been nearly seventeen when she died, yet the flower-like look of childhood had never left her. Sir Charles sighed; he had been very fond of Violet, yet all the sadness of that sigh was not for her; while his eyes saw the picture of her childhood upon the wall before him, and in his mind rose the remembrance of her girlhood,

another memory rose also—a memory likewise of sorrow, of sorrow living, throbbing. Another face was before him; side by side with Violet's it stood; both faces were young, both were fair, but in the eyes of one lay the trust that has never known deceit, in those of the other the hunted look of one whom it has dogged.

The duchess broke in upon his thoughts. She wanted to hear all about the Paris plays and the Paris frocks, she said, more especially about the frocks.

"My dear lady, no French play that is worth seeing will bear putting into English by daylight, and as for frocks, why, I never saw any," he expostulated.

"My dear Sir Charles, what do you imply? You admit that you saw the plays—*where*, then, were the frocks?"

The duke laughed.

"Perhaps Charlie likes women as he likes woodcock, my dear, not too much dressed," he suggested.

"Then I am ashamed of him!" said the duchess, and she helped herself to *poulet sauté*.

"That is really very kind of you," Sir

Charles commented blandly, "and so useful, for I never can manage to be properly ashamed of myself."

"I can quite believe that," his hostess retorted, "for I have never known you do anything properly, and I have known you some time."

"True; yet you have never dropped me," Sir Charles gently interjected.

The duchess put down her knife and fork and looked at him.

"Did I ever take you up?" she demanded.

"I have no recollection of your doing so," he answered, "and I am bound to admit that it is more in your line to take people down than up."

"Bravo, Charlie!" cried the duke. "Have some more chicken. You deserve it."

Sir Charles took some, and there was a moment's pause. The duchess's chair faced the picture; yet her eyes never reached even the lower edge of its frame, and as, for an instant, her face sank into repose, Sir Charles noted unwonted lines beside the clear-cut lips, and beneath the dark, unfathomable

eyes. Why does she sit there? he asked himself, and the answer rose with the question in his mind. She was a brave woman: one who met sorrow as she would meet danger, face to face, and ignoring it.

After luncheon as, coffee cup in hand, the duchess drew her chair closer to the brightly burning fire, and placed the tip of a pointed shoe upon the fender, she turned to Sir Charles.

"Now for your story," she said.

He stirred the sugar in his cup. "I don't know that it will interest you," he responded doubtfully.

"Of that," she answered, "I shall be able to judge when you have told it to me. Begin at the beginning; where did you meet her, and why is her story sad?" and the duchess leant back in her arm-chair with an air of determined listening. Sir Charles understood that she meant to have her own way, and he knew that when such was her intention she invariably had it. He therefore drank a little coffee, looked meditatively at the fire, and began.

"I met her in Paris," he said slowly. "I

first saw her at the theatre; she has one of those lovely, clear-cut profiles that stand out like a cameo from a crowd of ordinary faces; and I asked d'Othmar who she was. He offered to introduce me, to take me to supper at their house, where he had, he said, a standing invitation for himself and for any friend he cared to bring. He added, 'Don't play cards.' The caution, coupled with that cameo-like face, struck me as curious, so I went to supper, and discovered that to sit next to madame was to find her even more beautiful than she had appeared in the theatre. Her conversation, however—well, it wasn't conversation: she was like one of those walky, talky dolls, and the key winding her up seemed to be a glance from her husband's gimlet eyes. She smiled and spoke only when he looked at her. D'Othmar was the only person with whom she seemed at ease." Sir Charles paused and sipped his coffee slowly, then he added, "The supper was good, the wine better, and the cards too good. I did not play."

"Yet you went again," the duke commented drily.

Sir Charles nodded.

"And d'Othmar?" the duchess queried.

"Oh, my dear, d'Othmar is deeply involved in a platonic friendship with this lovely lady: friendship quite unmixed with flirtation—so at least Charlie assures me. There really must be something remarkable about the lady."

"I am interested," said the duchess. "What does d'Othmar say of her?" and she turned to Sir Charles.

"That he has never before experienced anything so pleasing as the sensation that a lovely woman trusts him, and that he does not intend to disappoint her," he answered.

The duke laughed, but his wife's dark eyes were thoughtful.

"How like d'Othmar," she commented. "He loves to be regarded as a rake, and would be miserable if he thought one guessed at half his kindly deeds."

"Yes, that's true," Sir Charles said with emphatic agreement. "He always seems to regard any suggestion of virtue as an imputation upon his costume, and he is certainly the best dressed man in Paris; but for all that, he

is a good friend to that poor child. The husband is much in awe of him and painfully eager to retain the *cachet* of his presence at his somewhat dubious receptions. I fancy d'Othmar's friendship for madame saves her from a good deal. He is convinced that she fears her husband terribly, and I fully agree with him."

"But why on earth did she marry him? I asked you that before luncheon, and you haven't answered me yet," said the duke.

"A chain of circumstances and a scheme of villainy," Sir Charles answered. "It appears that she was the only child of a poor country parson who, when her mother died, broke his heart, lost his head, chucked his living, and upon the strength of a few hundreds in the bank (his entire capital) and the hope of getting some foreign chaplaincy, took his daughter abroad, spent, lost, and got robbed of his money, and then caught a fever and died at some obscure Swiss inn."

"Ah, very sad," said the duke, "but you still evade the marriage question."

"Not at all. I have just explained it."

The duke raised his eyebrows. "Some-

what opaquely," he observed; "a father's death and a daughter's marriage are surely not synonymous?"

"Well, in this case they were," Sir Charles remarked somewhat curtly, and he rose to set down his now empty cup upon the mantelpiece.

"How did it all come about?" the duchess queried her, and her voice was full of interest.

Sir Charles turned to her quickly. "Well, you see, when the money was all gone and the old man was ill, the landlady said that those that could not pay should not stay; out they should go. The father was dying: they couldn't have moved him, and the daughter was well-nigh distracted: apparently they had no friends, or if they had, they were too proud to apply to them. The landlord, who had an eye for beauty, tried to soften his wife's heart it appears, and told her it would surely bring ill-luck upon the house if they turned out a dying man and a demoiselle with the face of an angel; but the woman would not listen to him."

"Of course not, if he put it like that,"

said the duchess. "A married man has done with angels."

"Well, that man had," said Sir Charles, "so he called in to the devil, in the shape of a Frenchman who had just arrived at the inn, and told him the whole story. The man was interested, naturally enough; his opportunities of meeting angels must have been uncommonly limited; so he watched for the poor child, found that the innkeeper's description was accurate, and managed to introduce himself and to worm himself into her father's confidence—how, the devil who prompted him may know, I don't," and the little man walked irritably over to the window and back again to the fireplace.

"Have a cigar: you'll find it soothing," the duke suggested, and he held out his case. "I suppose you have heard of Faust and Mephistopheles?"

"Don't be tiresome, Tom," said the duchess. "I want to hear the rest of the story."

"Oh, well, the villain played the succouring and sympathetic friend, smoothed down the landlady, poured oil and wine, or their

equivalents, upon the parson, even fetched an English doctor from Lucerne to make sure that he was dying, and when the old man did die, it was with a blessing for the villain on his lips and a prayer that his wretched child woud marry the brute."

"But surely she must have had some friends?" cried the duchess.

"If she had they made no sign. It appears that the poor girl was completely dazed after her father's death, and this scoundrel (Heaven help her!) looked after her. Then one fine day he reminds her of her father's last wishes, and not finding them sufficiently cogent, suggests that she has hopelessly compromised herself by remaining at the inn alone with him. She, poor baby! barely sixteen in years, and about six in knowledge of the world, believes him, and—marries him."

"But, my dear fellow, there's always the consul, and——"

"Good heavens, Deerham, what should a child of that age, fresh from a country parsonage, as Alice Aylmer was, know of consuls?"

"Alice Aylmer?" the duchess repeated slowly, and there was a great question in her voice.

"By Jove!" the duke exclaimed, and he sat bolt upright in his chair and looked apprehensively at his wife.

Sir Charles was staring at the fire; he paid no heed to the duke's exclamation; his thoughts were in Paris. "Yes, that was her maiden name. Do you know any of her people? Has she any?" he asked.

The duchess rose.

"She is my godchild: her mother was my dearest friend," she said slowly.

Sir Charles stared at her in blank amazement. "Your godchild," he repeated dully, "and—and married to Dubosc."

Quickly the duchess stretched one hand entreatingly towards him. "Don't, don't!" she cried in hurried, broken tones, "I have been selfish, wicked—I——"

"My dear Helen!" the duke interrupted, his tones bristling with fussy concern; he darted a look of reproach at Sir Charles, who glanced perplexedly from one to the other. The duchess had gone over to the writing-

table; she turned to them, a little china memorandum slate in her hand.

"Please write down her address," she said, and she handed a pencil and the slate to Sir Charles.

"You mean to write to her?" the duke asked anxiously.

"I mean to go to her," she answered, and she resumed her seat.

Her husband, however, sprang to his feet.

"Good heavens, Helen, what are you saying! Just consider—you don't know—indeed you don't—I really—" He broke off short and looked helplessly at Sir Charles, whose smooth face was visibly perturbed. He drew his hand thoughtfully across his brow. "There—there are complications, I fear," he said dubiously.

"So I imagine," the duchess responded placidly.

Her husband turned to her impulsively.

"You admit that," he cried, "and yet you propose—you seriously contemplate involving yourself with a—well, with a person like Dubosc."

"Not at all, my dear Tom. I merely con-

template cutting the threads in which my godchild is entangled."

"But since she has married the man?" the duke remonstrated.

"And," Sir Charles added, "since there are unfortunately complications——"

"Such as—" the duchess queried.

Again Sir Charles drew his hand across his brow. He wished that he had taken another cigar. "Oh, well, the usual 'such as,'" he answered. "Given a woman, young, lovely, and curiously innocent, married to a —well, to a Dubosc, the 'such as' is usually male in sex. Apart from sex, and from a benevolent desire to remove Dubosc and substitute a personality more pleasing, its qualities are divers. In the present case——"

"Yes, in the present case," the duchess interrupted, and she rose from her chair and faced the two men, a challenge glowing in her dark eyes, "with me it *is* present, very present. Alice Merton, this Alice's mother, was my friend and I was hers, or said and thought I was; yet I have let her child, my godchild, fall into the clutches of a Dubosc—according to you, his name seems noun and

adjective in one." She turned away and paced the room with quick, uneven steps: a tremor ran through her voice as she continued, "The poor child wrote to me of her father's death and said that she was to be speedily and quietly married to the friend who had closed his eyes, whom he had blessed with his dying breath!"

Sir Charles set his teeth hard. "Ah, I recognise Dubosc's dictation there," he muttered.

The duchess turned to him passionately.

"How could I know?" she cried. "I was away in America, and—and thinking of myself," her voice broke.

"My dear, my dear," her husband said soothingly. She faced him quickly.

"Ah, why did I not go to her?" she cried. "I sent her some diamonds and my blessing, and stayed on where I was, stifling myself in my own selfish sorrow, while the child of my dearest friend was thrown to the dogs."

"Oh, come now, Helen, you know you exaggerate, now really, you do," the duke expostulated.

"Ah, if I did! but I don't. It is my doing, all mine," and she resumed her pacing of the room. "Alice, poor little Alice!" she continued, half to herself, "Alice Aylmer, selling her soul to save her reputation, while we—" she made a gesture that seemed to comprehend all the luxurious appointments of the room as she spoke, and as she did so her eyes fell upon one of the little tables littered with knick-knacks. She stretched out her hand and taking up a small leather miniature case, she pressed the spring, and revealed the face of a lovely girl of about fifteen years. "Look," she cried, and she thrust the little case into her husband's hand, "there is the godchild in whose name I renounced the devil and all his works, the pomps and vanities of the world, and having given her pearls for her christening, and diamonds for her wedding, I let her become the decoy of a Dubosc!"

The duke looked at the miniature and handed it to Sir Charles.

"My dear," he said dubiously, "do you really imagine that she still looks like that?"

"Oddly enough, she does," Sir Charles exclaimed; "except for that look of fear in

her eyes," he added, and he sighed impatiently.

The duchess took the miniature case out of his hand and turned to leave the room.

"Where are you going, darling?" her husband asked.

"To arrange about my packing," she answered; "I shall go to-morrow."

"Now, my dear, really—" the duke began, but she interrupted him.

"Think," she said, and again her voice shook painfully, "think, if it were our Violet!"

The door closed behind her, and the two men looked at each other silently.

Then Sir Charles glanced at the clock.

"I must be going," he said; "good-bye, Tom."

"No, no," said the duke, "you must come back to dinner. There are a lot of things I must know, but I want to think now. You'll dine, won't you?"

"Of course I will," said Sir Charles.

"There's a good chap," the duke exclaimed, "eight fifteen."

CHAPTER III

A PERTURBED PARENT

SIR CHARLES DAVENANT had begun life in the diplomatic service and had lived in several foreign capitals, as he slowly mounted through the line of secretaries of embassy. Not long after he had reached the top, however, his elder brother had died suddenly, and Sir Charles, considering that it would suit him better to visit strange cities at his own time, pleasure, and expense, rather than at that of the Government, resigned, a step he had since, more than once, regretted, for he had passed through the common experience that there is no time a man finds it so hard to dispose of as his own.

He had never married. When young he had, he said, been too busy, and now that he was old, he was too idle.

To be exact, he was not old, and of this no

one was more fully aware than he himself. That was the reason why he talked about his age. His hair, it is true, was grey, but his figure was still trim, and his digestion trustworthy. Hair, after all, was a detail, and an unreliable one at that. Always scrupulously well dressed, courteous, and smiling, Sir Charles Davenant was a welcome guest and companion wherever and whenever he appeared. There was, however, no smile upon his face as he left Deerham House and slowly sought the way to his club. A load of thought lay upon his brow, and he shook his head more than once in negation of insistent mental questions. "It would never do, never," he muttered to himself, and the pucker between his brows grew deeper. He asked himself what had possessed him to tell that story; he called himself a fool; he declared that the manner in which the duchess invariably got her own way was preposterous; but he found no comfort, and even when the lights of his club shone full upon him, even when he found himself comfortably inside its respectable walls, and safely settled within the shelter of an arm-chair in the reading-room, he

found no comfort still. The papers were depressing when they were not dull, dull when they were not depressing. He thought he would have some tea; really nice, hot, club tea and muffin; that would do him good perhaps. He turned to ring the bell.

"Hallo, Charlie!" cried a voice from a chair behind him.

He turned round quickly.

"What—you, Walter!" he exclaimed.

Lord Walter Stuart rose. "Yes," he answered laconically, "come to the smoking-room and have a talk."

Sir Charles hesitated.

"I was just going to ring for some tea," he objected.

"Then ring for a whisky and soda instead," said Lord Walter, and Sir Charles followed him unwillingly from the room. He regretted that tea and muffin; food, he thought, was like freedom, the farther you left the idea of it behind, the nicer it seemed. Walter Stuart was, however, an old friend, and Sir Charles had a habit of falling into his friends' ways and moods without much regard to his own. It has been mentioned that he was a popular

man. He wondered what Walter wanted to say to him, and trusted that he would not enquire for his son. This, however, when once the requisite whiskies and sodas and cigars had been supplied, was precisely what Lord Walter did.

"Just come back from Paris, haven't you?" he said.

"Yes, I arrived yesterday."

Lord Walter blew a large cloud of cigar smoke towards the ceiling.

"Did you see my boy there?"

"Oh, yes, now and again."

"Any idea what's keeping him over there?"

Sir Charles laughed, but a Bismarck would have detected no merriment, not even diplomatic merriment, in the sound, although it is possible that he might have observed other qualities, equally interesting.

"My dear Walter, Paris is always amusing to young men," he responded vaguely.

"Not in the shooting season," Lord Walter promptly retorted, and it seemed to Sir Charles that the flavour of the club cigars had gone off since he was last in London. He

made, however, no comment, and presently Lord Walter resumed, "Do you know, Charlie, I am a bit worried about that boy. Never knew him miss the first cover shoot before, unless he was stuck for leave, and then he damned pretty freely, I can tell you. Now here he is *on* leave, and he spends it in Paris, and don't damn at all!"

"Wanted a change perhaps," Sir Charles suggested feebly.

"A change!" Lord Walter echoed scornfully, "why, we killed two thousand pheasants our first day; who would want a change from that, I should like to know! Unless—and that's what I'm afraid of—there's a woman in the case." He paused and looked enquiringly at his friend. Sir Charles was, however, busily engaged in knocking the ash off his cigar; an occupation apparently too absorbing to permit him to answer. "I dare say I'm a fool," Lord Walter continued, "hope to Heaven I am, but I've always been afraid that Dick would go a howler some day over a woman. He's kept a lot too clear of them."

"That's true," Sir Charles agreed. "It's a bad habit."

"Did—did you happen to hear or notice anything while you were in Paris?" Lord Walter said tentatively.

"I seldom believe what I hear, and I never take notice," Sir Charles answered somewhat curtly. "I am past the age of cooing at things."

Lord Walter was silent. He had not been brought up as a diplomat, but he understood when it was useless to ask questions.

Sir Charles rose.

"Going?" Lord Walter queried.

"Yes, I am dining out and have got a lot of letters to answer first." He moved towards the door, but turning back before he reached it, he asked, "When is the Delmer shoot?"

"Next week."

"I think I should wire for Dick. He may want another change by then," and hastening from the room, Sir Charles left the club and walked quickly away to his flat in Park Lane. He had had enough of his friends.

CHAPTER IV

THOSE COMPLICATIONS

"DEAR, dear, dear!" said the Duke of Deerham, and he pushed his chair back from the table, and getting up from it, proceeded to pace the dining-room with long, uneven strides.

Presently he paused in front of Sir Charles Davenant, who was still seated at the dining-table looking with unseeing eyes at a glass of port wine which undoubtedly deserved attention.

"You know, Charlie, it all sounds as disreputable as possible," he said.

Sir Charles nodded.

"The fellow appears to be a blackleg of the deepest dye," the duke continued, "and then there are all these—er—complications. By the bye, who are they?"

Sir Charles sipped his wine before he an-

swered; then he said slowly, "A Frenchman, Count René de Courchamps, to begin with."

"What's he like?"

"Passionate, profligate, and *dédaigné de madame*, who turns up her pretty nose at him without scenting the danger of the brute."

"Just like a woman," the duke said vexedly as he resumed his seat: "and the rest?"

"Oh, the usual *jeunesse dorée*, whose devotion expresses itself in a fusillade of bouquets and *œillades*, and an urbane desire to lose money to Dubosc. That's all—except Dick Stuart."

"What, our Dick Stuart? the one in the Guards? Walter's son?"

"Precisely. Dick was always a chivalrous sort of chap, you know, and this damsel in distress business has hit him hard. He forgets that the modern social code wasn't made for chivalrous enterprise. Nowadays, instead of disposing of dragons and rescuing damsels, the *preux chevalier* finds himself in the divorce court, and the lady is ruined, not rescued."

"Dear, dear, dear!" said the duke again, and again he rose from his chair and resumed his perturbed pacing of the room. "Really, it's most unfortunate that Helen——"

"What about Helen?" a soft, clear voice queried behind him.

He turned round sharply. "What, my dear, you here?"

"Yes, I came back to see why you took such an unconscionable time over your wine," she answered, and she sat down in an arm-chair by the fire. "Now what have you been talking about?"

The duke looked at Sir Charles, but the little man's eyes were once more fixed upon his wine-glass.

"Well?" said the duchess.

"Well, my dear, the—well, the fact is, Charlie and I have been talking over this mad project of yours, and do you know, darling, I really don't at all like the notion of your mixing yourself up in the affair at all. You see, you don't understand the type of man you would have to deal with—it—it's quite impossible that you should."

"Is it, dear?" the duchess asked gently.

"Why of course it is. Good heavens, Helen, where could you possibly get any knowledge of—of blackguards?"

"They are men, dear."

"Men, men," he echoed irritably, "about as much like the men you have known as a panther is like a cat."

The duchess laughed. "But, my dear Tom, I don't want the man," she said. "Only his wife."

"And how on earth are you going to get her?" the duke demanded. "Of course, I am sorry, very sorry, for the girl, and it's really most unfortunate that she should be your godchild; no one can regret the whole thing more than I do, I assure you. Why on earth she hadn't sense enough to write to you instead of making this wretched marriage, I can't conceive; but she hadn't; she married the man, and I really do not see how you can interfere between husband and wife simply because you happen to have been her godmother—I don't like it. In fact, my dear, I must say I strongly object."

His wife watched him with affectionate amusement as he walked irritably up and down.

"So you object, Tom, strongly object," she said softly. "It's not like you, my dear. But let us talk it over quietly. Stop tramping

about the room like a wild beast; sit down and listen to me." She drew forward another arm-chair as she spoke; the duke hesitated for an instant; the next he submissively subsided into its comfortable depths. "The case stands thus:" the duchess continued, and she made a gesture with her hand as if some plan of campaign laid stretched out upon the carpet before her. "You object to my going to Alice because she is married to a rascal and surrounded by the sort of men who consider that her position makes her as assuredly their desert as her beauty makes her their desire. Now, my position is not precisely similar."

"Good heavens, Helen!" cried the duke, and he bounded in his chair. His wife laid her hand upon his shoulder.

"Just so, dear," she said quietly. "The Dubosc surroundings are scarcely likely to annoy me and—and I have no daughter now to think of," her voice broke and her husband laid his hand affectionately upon hers; Sir Charles hurriedly poured some more wine into his glass, and spilt it on the cloth. In an instant, however, the duchess recovered her self-control and drawing her chair close in

front of her husband's, she said impressively, "Now, my dear Tom, I want you, please, to exert your imagination. Forget, forget absolutely, that you are Duke of Deerham and a double millionaire. For the moment you are nothing of the sort, you are a penniless parson."

"Oh, come now, Helen, you can't expect me to feel like a parson," he remonstrated.

"Oh, you needn't trouble about the religious aspect," she answered, "it is only the human side that matters: you must *feel* poor."

"Well, my dear, I will try," the duke said resignedly, "but you know I was only nine when my father died, and ever since——"

His wife interrupted him. "Oh, yes, I know. Ever since you have been monarch of all you survey, and never quite sure how much money you have got because you can't do big sums."

"That's true," the duke agreed. "I remember when I had jaundice, Bill Winton said it was the guineas coming out, and that if I were a pauper like him I should be a proper colour."

Sir Charles and the duchess laughed.

"Well, you *are* a proper colour now," said the latter, "so please imagine yourself a pauper. Now, mind," and she raised one finger emphatically, "you are absolutely penniless, and too proud to ask help from friends who might, or might not, be disposed to give it. Your wife is dead—to you she was the sun round which the world revolved," she paused, and the duke nodded; his wife had at last made him recognise himself. "Without her," the duchess continued, and her tones grew very tremulous, "even the love of the daughter left to you fails to bring comfort, she is your only child." Once more her voice broke; her husband took her hand in his and held it there; the slender fingers twined themselves tightly about his, and she continued resolutely, "You are her only shield against the world; a world which is kindliest to those who stand in little need of kindliness. Remember she has no one, no one in the world but you!" she paused, and the duke nodded.

"Then," the duchess continued, "you die, and your daughter, your only child, young, beautiful, and as innocent as a baby, falls into the clutches of an unscrupulous *roué* who mar-

ries her in order to drag her into the mire of his squalid life—to make a puppet of her for his own base ends. Think of it, Tom, think of it! What would the friends be, who knowing the plight of this poor, trapped creature, shrugged their shoulders and passed by?" She turned her face to his; tears were streaming down her cheeks.

The duke sprang to his feet. "Why, they'd be damned hard-hearted brutes," he cried.

His wife smiled through her tears. "And are you a hard-hearted brute, Tom?" she asked softly.

"No, I'm hanged if I am," he cried; "I'll come to Paris with you, and—and kick Dubosc!"

His wife kissed him.

"You're a darling!" she exclaimed; "but I think you are safer in England. The English kick is so misunderstood in France, and it leads to so many—technicalities."

"But if you don't kick the brute, what on earth *will* you do?" her husband objected.

"Exchange notes—diplomatic, or other-

wise. That's the proper course, isn't it, Sir Charles?"

The ex-diplomat nodded.

"Besides," she added reflectively, "these creatures are usually to be bought."

"But you know, my dear, I don't at all like your going alone. It isn't at all suitable. In fact it's impossible," and the duke rose and stood with his back to the fireplace. He was over six feet, and like most tall men, he felt that his stature should impress people—even his wife. "You simply can't go alone," he continued; "you must have a man with you."

His wife folded her hands submissively; she had got all she wanted.

"Well, I don't quite know what there will be for the poor man to do, except perhaps to carry my cloak," she said. "But if you insist upon male escort—" she paused, and the duke nodded; he felt that insistence in a husband was the right thing. "Well, then," she continued, "perhaps Sir Charles would go with me?" she turned towards the little man as she spoke.

He rose and crossed quickly to the fireplace.

"It would be very kind of you," she added.

"Kind of me!" he exclaimed; "why nothing in the world could give me greater pleasure."

She put both her hands in his. "You are a true friend," she said, "but don't exaggerate. It will bore you horribly. Still for the sake of our old friendship, and out of sympathy for my poor Alice, I knew you would come. So it's all settled, and we will start to-morrow morning—eleven o'clock, from Victoria."

The duke's face fell.

"To-morrow morning, dear?" he said interrogatively. "You know there are those new cottages at Kingsmead, and the pig-sties, to settle about?"

"But can't you do all that alone?" she queried, and her eyes danced as she spoke.

"Oh, yes, I can do it," her husband answered, "but I shall probably tell them to put the troughs in the cottages and the wash-house in the pig-sties, you know."

The duchess and Sir Charles laughed.

"Poor old Tom," she said, and she slipped her hand through his arm, "let us write the letter to-night."

"Well, I must be going," Sir Charles remarked, and he held out his hand to his hostess.

"Driven away by the pigs, Charlie?" the duke queried.

"No, claimed by my packing," he answered. "*À demain*, duchess."

"*À demain*," she answered, "and thank you."

The door closed behind him, and she put her arms about her husband's neck.

"Tom, you are a darling," she said. "It would have broken my heart not to go."

CHAPTER V

AN ENIGMA

THE sky above was blue and clear, softened by fleecy white clouds that spread, divided, closed up and then again broke loose in the pleasant westerly breeze. The blue of the water, the whiteness of the foam into which it churned itself as the steamer forced her path through its waves, rivalled the colours of the sky. In a chair, so placed that the fitful little gusts of wind could not annoy her, sat the Duchess of Deerham; beside her was Sir Charles Davenant. She had been very silent during the journey from London to Dover, and it seemed to Sir Charles, as he glanced covertly at the proud, statuesque face, that the lines which he had the previous day noted about the mouth were a shade deeper, the little network under the eyes more definite. What a fascinating face

it was! he thought, and as he yielded to its charm his glance forgot to be covert; it grew indeed so intent as at last to pierce the duchess's mantle of thought. She turned her head.

"What are you staring at?" she asked.

"At you, dear lady," he answered hardily.

"How dull!" she commented. "Talk to me instead; you have a great deal to tell me, for I must have the whole *carte du pays* before we reach Paris."

Sir Charles looked out seaward, and the duchess scanned his face even as he had scanned hers: she was not, however, admiring his profile, nor yet lamenting a single line upon his face.

"Now tell me exactly what the situation is," she said, "and explain these 'complications,' as you call them."

"Madame Dubosc is very beautiful, very unhappy, and *un peu trop ingénue*," Sir Charles said slowly.

"Poor child," the duchess commented, and she sighed, "*après?*"

"Where beauty and unhappiness meet, there birds of prey do congregate," he said sententiously.

"Poor little Alice! Certainly, to bring a child up to fit a possible heaven is wholly to unfit it for a positive world! Yet, surely, her very ignorance is a shield."

"To a certain extent, yes; but against passion turned to jealousy and hate, there is no shield."

"What do you mean?" the duchess exclaimed. "Dubosc jealous! You told us that his marriage was a mere contract—the securing of an unpaid decoy."

"Exactly: to Dubosc his wife is a mere tool, and she, poor child! having, I suppose, been brought up in old-fashioned notions as to the duty of a wife, obeys him blindly, all unconscious of the why and wherefore of his commands. Jealousy would by no means suit Dubosc's rôle. It was not to him that I referred."

"To whom then?" the duchess cried quickly.

"To a far more dangerous person," he answered, and his tone was grave. "The woman who spurns Count René de Courchamps——"

"Count René de Courchamps!" the

duchess exclaimed, and the book that had been lying idly on her knee fell to the ground. Sir Charles picked it up and handed it to her.

"Yes," she said, "Count René de Courchamps—an ex-diplomat: very much ex. Do you know anything of him?"

"Oh, yes," she answered absently, and her eyes were fixed upon the waves; "he was first secretary to my brother-in-law when he was ambassador to the Quirinal."

Sir Charles raised his eyebrows. "Really? He can scarcely have been a *persona grâta* to de Villemar," he said.

"He was not," the duchess responded shortly. "He stayed only a short time."

A momentary silence fell between them: then she spoke again. "So my poor Alice has made René de Courchamps her enemy?" she said.

"Like ourselves, Mme. Dubosc finds him not to her taste," Sir Charles answered, "and in spite of his intimacy with her husband she repels his advances with a hauteur which—well, which is very English."

"Dear child!" the duchess commented.

"Quite so; unfortunately, however, it

does not strike de Courchamps exactly in that light, especially as madame has allowed him to see that she *can* smile, though not on him."

"Ah!" and she drew in her breath, "then she *does* smile?"

"Yes, elsewhere."

"And the elsewhere is——?"

"Dick Stuart. Six feet of very good material to smile upon—you must admit that."

"And he?" she queried.

"Oh, he worships the ground she treads upon," Sir Charles answered in the matter of course tone habitually adopted by a man when discussing the love affairs of others. "If only his worship would stop there it would be all right, but unluckily it won't; everything rises—even damp."

"That is funny," said the duchess, "I quite admit it, but I am not in the mood for laughing. How does M. Dubosc view the situation?"

"Through the binocular of the polite husband. As I said before, jealousy is a vulgarity which would defeat his ends—ends which his wife, in her utter ignorance of what they are, furthers ably. To de Courchamps, how-

ever, Dubosc's ends matter not a jot. Formerly he went to the house to win money; now he goes to win madame."

"And she turns her back upon him!" the duchess interjected.

"Just so; and her face to Dick Stuart, of whom he is therefore furiously jealous. It is there that the danger lies."

The duchess slowly turned a bracelet upon her wrist. It was set with different coloured stones, whose initial letters formed the word "Dearest"; it seemed that she was intent upon spelling it out. Presently, however, she spoke.

"I have not seen M. de Courchamps for ten years," she said. "It will be interesting to meet him again."

"You propose meeting him?" Sir Charles cried in astonishment.

"It may be necessary," she responded.

Sir Charles raised his eyebrows. "Then I hope," he said, and his voice was sarcastic, "that you will find the meeting interesting!"

"I think I shall," she answered. "You see, one so seldom meets really finished blackguards; as a rule it is only those in embryo

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who are left at large, and I detest unfinished things."

"My dear duchess," Sir Charles expostulated, "is not this slightly forcible? De Courchamps is all that is obnoxious, I admit, but he comes of a good old family, and he is a member of the French Jockey Club."

"I have often felt sorry for his ancestors," she answered. "They were most respectable people, I believe. As for the Jockey Club—well, the committee is composed of men."

"And do you consider that we know nothing of one another?" Sir Charles exclaimed indignantly.

"Oh, of course, you know what you see," she said indifferently. "So do we; and remember, the light in which we see men is sometimes a fiercer light than yours. We also have something more than sight to guide us—we know what other men tell us; every secret possessed by a man has been told to some woman."

"Possibly: certainly secrets are never kept," Sir Charles commented drily.

The duchess smiled enigmatically. "Do you know, I think I will go downstairs," she

said. "It is getting cold. We shall meet again at Calais," and gathering her sables more closely about her she walked slowly along the deck and disappeared.

His eyes followed her.

"I wonder what her secret is," he said, and he lighted a cigar and thought about it.

CHAPTER VI

CHEZ SOI

COLD, clear, and brilliant as a crystal that has caught the light, Paris lay sparkling in the winter sunshine; its rays lay red as blood upon the window-panes, yet left the houses untouched in their chill whiteness: so intensely pure was the air that every architectural detail stood out definite as a draughtsman's plan against the vast serenity of the pale blue sky; the light seemed to touch each grain of dust on the broad white roadway of the Champs Elysées and to a person looking down from an upper story in one of the tall houses standing back behind the trees, the hurrying foot passengers seemed but as ants hastening to their ant-heaps. Here and there some pale yellow wisp of smoke blurred the blueness for an instant, but the air was too crisp and clear to hold it, and almost as it

reached the sky it melted, vanished. Paris was at her brightest; coldly, cruelly beautiful and gay, brilliant as a diamond, and as hard.

From the distance came the dull roar of the great city; it seemed the groundwork of some piece of orchestral music, the *motif* of which was furnished by the sharp, shrill whistle of the motor cars as they whizzed down the wide road in whirling clouds of dazzling white dust.

In one of the bow windows of a house that looked out over and through the trees upon the avenue, stood a slender, girlish-looking figure, watching the blaze of golden light refracted from the Palais de l'Industrie as the sun flung its dazzling rays full upon it in all the lavishness of a wealth which cheques cannot absorb, nor bankruptcies annul. Her eyes were very sad, and the vivid beauty that lay beyond her window appeared to hold no cheering tone for her; indeed, its very loveliness seemed to say that the face of sorrow should be hidden and the voice of lament be still; no place for them lay in this town vibrating with gay, careless vitality; they were out of the picture; let them vanish into the dark-

ness whence they came. In all the length and breadth of this vast city teeming with life, had she a friend? As the question formed itself in her mind two figures rose side by side before her mental vision. Both were tall, but there the likeness ended. The first figure was very slender and was dressed with an accentuated perfection that lent a foreign touch to cloth that had surely been cut and fashioned by an English tailor. Silvery white hair, not yet thin, was brushed scrupulously back above the smooth forehead, and the high-bred features and pale blue eyes seemed calm and chill as the atmosphere outside her window; yet as, in imagination, her own eyes met his, a wealth of protective kindliness dawned and deepened beneath the indolently drooping eyelids; the firm lines of the mouth relaxed, the whole face changed. It was surely that of a friend. A little smile showed itself at the corners of her mouth, yet she sighed. The other figure was younger, broader, more stalwart. Thick, close-cropped fair hair crowned one of those clean-cut faces which are the hall-mark of a Briton in good health and training. No accentuated

care of dress was here, but rather a careless certainty that all was, and must be, right. Nothing in this face reflected the callous spirit of Paris; sympathy, friendship, were writ thereon for all who looked to read. She did not doubt the writing, yet again she sighed, and the piece of work she held fell to the ground.

"Dreaming, my dear?" a thin voice asked in sharp staccato accents, as a door to the right of the room opened, and a quick-eyed, dark-haired man entered.

The woman whom he addressed turned to him with a start.

"You, Gaston?" she said, "I thought you had gone out."

"Not yet, my dear," he answered, "I wished first to have a little conversation with you," and taking a silver-gilt case, adorned with a large jewelled monogram, from his pocket he carefully selected a cigar, and lighted it with equal attention. "I have been thinking, my dear," he continued, as he blew little rings of smoke towards the ceiling, "thinking and observing; and there are one or two little matters which occur to me. I

trust that I have your attention?" He turned sharply towards her, and with a gesture of assent she sat down on the window seat, her work in her hands. He watched her from under his eyelids.

"You know, *chérie*, you English are really in some things quite elementary," he proceeded. "In social life for instance, all is with you so big, so blatant, *vous vous affichez partout*. If you flirt, the whole world views your assignations, hears your whispers. If, on the other hand, you do *not* flirt, the virtue of refusal is cried from the house-tops! Is it not so?" He paused for a reply, but the sad eyes did not meet his; they were fixed intently upon the handkerchief in and out of which the slender fingers guided their needle with what seemed excessive care. The man knocked the ash from his cigar and continued:

"Now what I would say, my child, is this: you have married a Frenchman and these insular ideas no longer become you. With us there is a *finesse*, a delicacy, a refinement, about every social relation, legitimate, or—otherwise. A coquette knows how not to be

remarked, while she who is not coquette, instead of being stiff, icy, *farouche*, if but a little compliment is paid to her with a grace, a tact, she smiles, evades—but refuses, never." He paused, but she did not speak, and his tone was sharper, more incisive, as he resumed. "It is this that you must learn, *chérie*. You understand?"

The handkerchief and the hands that held it dropped clasped together on her knee, and at last the long lashes lifted and her eyes met his.

"I fear you will find me a bad pupil," she said wearily, "I have no tact, no *finesse*."

"Then acquire them, my child," he responded with prompt decision. "Believe me, *tout s'apprend*, and to-night when our guests assemble, let me see that you have profited by my little lesson. Let me see you smile on all, listen to all alike, with that charm which alone makes woman admirable."

Once more he paused for a reply. None came. He threw away the end of his cigarette and lighted a fresh one, his alert eyes closely watching the figure in the window as he did so: it seemed to him that the needle

moved hurriedly, uncertainly, but she who held it made no sign. Once more he blew his cigarette smoke circling upwards, then he spoke again.

"You do not answer, *chérie*," he said, "but I trust you understand that I expect your obedience!" His tone leant on the words, and upon his listener it acted like a blow: she sprang to her feet.

"I can behave neither with charm nor amiability to M. de Courchamps," she cried passionately. "I detest him. Why will you persist in inviting him?"

M. Dubosc shrugged his shoulders. "In France, my child, it is the husband who decides what gentlemen his wife shall receive. M. de Courchamps is my friend, and I desire that you will do nothing to offend him."

The work fell from her hand and she gazed at him with incredulous wonder in her eyes.

"I offend him? I?" she repeated. "It is he who offends me grossly. His very presence here is an outrage. You know how he has insulted me, and yet you, my husband, treat him as an honoured guest, and com-

mand me to receive him with grace and charm!" A bitter irony rang through the last words, and turning sharply away she paced up and down the room in uncontrollable agitation.

Once more her husband shrugged his shoulders and for a moment smoked on in placid silence; then, removing the cigarette from his lips, he said sarcastically, a thin smile curling the corners of his mouth as he spoke, "Offence! Insult! Dear child, what words! A little compliment, that is all. You are young, innocent; you do not know the ways of the world, but I shall instruct you, and soon it will seem to you but natural that all Paris should make you compliments. Believe me, my dear," and his smile grew more incisive, "you will soon grow accustomed to your beauty—and to its results."

A smothered sob broke from her: impetuously she hurried over to him, and caught his arm imploringly between her trembling hands.

"Oh, Gaston, Gaston, do not be so cruel!" she cried, "I don't think you can know—you *cannot* understand. Have a little

pity! Let me go away somewhere, anywhere. I don't care how poor a place it is, and I will do dressmaking, sewing, anything, to pay for my board and lodging! I can make dresses quite nicely, really I can, and I will cost you nothing—only let me go, let me go!" and with a despairing cry she fell on her knees before him.

With one hand her husband took his cigarette from his mouth, the other he extended coldly to his wife.

"Rise, Alice, I beg," he said frigidly. "This is not *convenable, mais pas du tout convenable,*" and he made a little disdainful movement with his shoulders. His wife, who had risen as he bade her, stood silently before him, her whole frame trembling painfully. His eyelids were lowered, yet the alert eyes watched her as a snake watches the shivering bird upon the bough; it must fall from its perch anon; the snake can wait.

"You must not be childish, my dear," he continued; "before marriage you were all gratitude, all submission. Such gratitude, such submission would become you now. I do not want protestations; I want obedience,

and I intend to have it. I have been kind to you—indulgent. Do not force me to be otherwise. You understand?" His voice rang with a cruel clearness. Upon her overstrained nerves it acted as a tonic: she raised her eyes to his.

"Yes," she said quietly, "I understand now, perfectly."

He thought that he had cowed her into submission, and his tone changed.

"*C'est bien, très bien,*" he said lightly, "and now I must go out. I dine at my club, and you, I suppose, as you are a little upset, will prefer one of your English cups of tea in your room, so *au revoir, chérie!* When I return, let me find a beautiful hostess in a beautiful toilette with a beautiful smile! *Au revoir!*" and kissing the tips of his fingers to her lightly, he left the room, softly humming a gay French tune as he went.

For a moment after the door had closed behind him, Mme. Dubosc stood staring at it silently, her hands tightly clenched together. Then with a gesture of impotent despair they fell to her sides. "What shall I do, what shall I, can I do?" she cried. "Heaven help

me, I hate him; oh, how I hate him!" and with a long, shuddering sigh she sank down upon the window seat and buried her face in her hands. Presently she raised her head, and a question shone in her eyes.

"Could I?" she queried, "could I?" but at some sudden recollection her look clouded. "He watches me always," she said, "and the servants watch too, and I have no money: he won't even let me have my jewels. If I could get them—oh, I *can't* bear it any more, I can't, I can't!" and with a bitter sob she buried her head in the cushions of the window seat.

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The sound of an opening door roused her; hastily she raised her tear-stained face: the servant was holding back the door for some one to enter.

"M. le Capitaine Stu-art," he announced, and there in the doorway stood the younger of the two figures that had not long before answered to her thoughts as she asked herself whether she had a friend.

In his hand was a great bunch of roses, white and pink.

He made a step forward as if to offer them, and as he did so the light fell full upon the sad, fair face, with tears, half dried, upon its cheeks.

He flung the flowers upon a chair.

"Madame, dear madame," he cried, "what is the matter—tell me?" He caught her hand impulsively in his, but she turned away from him.

"Nothing," she said, "nothing."

"Nothing?" he echoed, "Ah, that is what one says to the world, but not to one's friends, and I am your friend; you and I know that." He sat down on the window seat beside her, and spoke very earnestly.

"What are friends for," he asked, "if not to help in times of trouble?"

She shook her head. "You cannot help me," she said hopelessly; "no one can."

"But I can," he cried, "I will: and I *can* because I *will.* Don't you know that will can always make a way?"

Again she shook her head. "There is no way," she answered.

"But there is!" he retorted, and he sprang to his feet and paced the room excitedly.

"There is always a way through everything if only we will see it, and this is plain enough, God knows. Oh, you need tell me nothing: I know it well enough. It is this horrible life that is killing you, that——"

"Hush!" she cried, "hush!" and she glanced apprehensively around the room.

"I will not hush," he answered passionately. "What do I care who hears me? What do I care for anything, anyone in the world but you!"

She shrank back against the window curtains, and her hands clutched at and clung to them desperately.

"No, no," she cried, "not that from you! Are you all alike? All? Oh—what have I done that the whole world should insult me?" Her words ended in a sob; her feverish hold of the curtains relaxed, and crossing quickly over to the mantelpiece she leant her arms upon it and stood with her back towards him.

It seemed that her words had stunned him; for an instant he stood silent, but only for an instant.

"I insult you? I—who would cut off

my right hand to save you from a scratch? I love you—yes; but is there insult in such a love? I have asked, will ask you, for nothing in return—unless—unless— No matter; let the future care for itself: we are dealing with the present now. An impossible, unendurable present."

"It cannot be impossible since it *is*," she answered bitterly, "and everyone can endure —until they die."

"Can they?" he cried passionately, "I cannot, *will* not," and again he paced the floor in long, angry strides. Suddenly he stopped in front of her.

"You, *you*, in this iniquitous place," he said. "An angel chained in a den of devils!"

"Hush!" she said again, and she raised her hand in a faint gesture of command. "You forget that this house of which you speak is my husband's."

"Forget it! Would to God I could," he exclaimed bitterly, and he turned away from her. "Great heaven! how could you, *you* tie yourself to—Dubosc?" He turned back suddenly and faced her once more.

"Tell me that?" he said, "why did you

marry him?" His eyes scanned her face with piercing scrutiny as if to read the answer there, but her lips gave it.

"To pay him what was owed," she said quietly, and her eyes met his full. "It seems a little hard that when one has given one's whole life to wipe out a debt it should not be enough," and she turned away.

He stared at her uncomprehendingly. "What do you mean? I do not understand," he cried.

She faced him passionately. "You do not understand! Yet it is simple enough," she answered bitterly. "My father and I were—under obligations—to M. Dubosc, and —there was only one way to pay them—this!" She flung out her hand as she spoke, and the sunshine glinting on the gold of her wedding-ring seemed to turn it into a circle of fire.

Still Dick Stuart stared at her.

"Then you sold yourself," he said slowly.

"Had I a choice?" she cried. "The debt was—was not mine, and I was only sixteen. He was kind, and I thought—I thought he loved me. I thought there could be no other

reason for marrying a penniless orphan." An uncontrollable shudder shook her frame from head to foot. She leant back against the mantelpiece and hid her face in her hands.

He sprang towards her.

"Oh, forgive me, forgive me!" he cried. "I was brutal, unjust; I did not know what I was saying. I was mad—mad for love of you. Oh, my dearest, let me take you away from all this. Let——"

She pushed him back.

"No, no!" she cried. "My own misery and ruin are enough. I will not make yours!"

He laughed aloud.

"You make misery for me!" he cried. "It is not possible if you are with me. Without you, life is a hell: with you it would be heaven."

She shook her head.

"Heaven is not to be stormed; your way does not lead there. You are sorry for me, I know——"

"Sorry!" he echoed scornfully.

"Yes, sorry," she repeated, "and you love me—oh, yes, I believe it, and—and I am

grateful, for it is not a love like—" She checked herself sharply. "If—if you do really love me, you will help me," she said.

"Tell me what I can do," he cried.

"Will you do it?"

"You know that I will," he answered.

"Then you must go back to England," she said, and she raised her hand in a little beseeching gesture as he tried to break in upon her words. "Yes, after to-night you must not come here again," she continued; "you will tell M. Dubosc that you have received a telegram which——"

He interrupted her.

"I will not go," he said.

Her eyes met his.

"And your promise?"

He turned abruptly away and strode over to the window; for a moment he stood looking out with unseeing eyes upon the trees and road, then once again he faced her.

"If I go I shall return," he said hoarsely, "and before I go you must make me a promise!"

"What is it?" she asked.

"This—that when the time comes, as it

must, when you find it impossible to remain here an instant longer, you will send for me. You can trust me, I don't think I need tell you that."

There was a moment's pause. Then, "I promise," she said slowly. He raised her hand to his lips; then turning silently away from her, he went towards the door; as he neared it the handle turned and a servant flung it wide.

"M. le Comte René de Courchamps," he announced glibly.

Dick Stuart started, and a black cloud gathered on his brow; the Frenchman bowed, and Dick, giving a curt nod in return, strode from the room. De Courchamps smiled.

"*Bon jour, madame. Quelle chance* to find you *chez vous*," he said as he advanced into the room and took a chair near the sofa upon which Mme. Dubosc was seated. "I have just met your amiable husband, who gave me his permission to pay my respects to you, and I eagerly seized the opportunity to offer you ten thousand excuses for my too great—what shall I say?—enthusiasm—the other evening. Your beauty, madame, is like wine

—one loses the head! *Ces yeux incendiaires!*"

Mme. Dubosc rose, and walking over to the window stood looking out on to the avenue as Dick had done a moment since, her back towards her guest. He followed her.

"Ah, *chère madame*," he cried entreatingly, "you must pardon the passion you create. Let these poor flowers be my peace-offering?" and he held out to her a magnificent bunch of orchids which he had been holding delicately between his finger and thumb since he came into the room.

With a scornful gesture Alice Dubosc waved the flowers away from her. "I am sorry, monsieur, that you should have had the trouble of making a call of apology," she said. "It was quite unnecessary; and I regret it the more, since I have an appointment with my dressmaker, who is already awaiting me—I must therefore ask you to excuse me."

She moved towards the door, but he intercepted her.

"Pardon, madame, dressmakers have waited ere this, and will wait again," he cried. "Their claims seemed all forgotten when I

arrived so inopportunely to interrupt madame's charming *tête-à-tête* with M. le Capitaine—whose flowers I see are welcome as himself," and he indicated the bunch of roses that still lay upon the chair where Dick had thrown them. A cruel light was in his eyes and his lips were curved in an ironic smile. "The virtue of madame is, it appears, reserved only for the friends and countrymen of her husband," he said, in slow, incisive tones.

Her delicate face paled to marble and her blue eyes flashed dangerously.

"How dare you, monsieur?" she cried, and the low tones of her voice were tense with passion.

De Courchamps shrugged his shoulders. "Dare? Oh, madame, I dare all, and now that I know who my rival is it will give me great pleasure, very great pleasure indeed, to place him a little bullet through the lungs."

His eyes were fixed upon her face, but no quiver moved its coldness.

"You mistake, monsieur," she said in quiet, even tones. "Captain Stuart is nothing to me, and it is not possible that you

should have a rival since you hold no place in my esteem."

De Courchamps's wolf-like teeth closed savagely behind his thick moustache. "*Bien, madame, nous verrons,*" he answered, and he bowed low before her. "Had you told me that you were not free it would have been different, but to make me these airs of virtue when all the time——"

"This is insufferable, monsieur! My husband——"

De Courchamps's laugh interrupted her.

"Oh, your husband! *Chère madame, le mari n'a rien à y dire.* It is only the lover who——"

"Be silent, monsieur," she cried. "You are a coward and a liar."

Again he bowed.

"*Bien, madame,*" he said once more. "It is the lover who will pay me for these little compliments. *Au revoir,*" and he turned swiftly away from her and left the room.

As the door closed behind him, the anger in her eyes faded and died beneath a growing terror; with the wild look of a hunted thing her eyes wandered round the room, seeking

they knew not what. Suddenly the silver inkstand on the writing-table arrested her attention. She darted to the table, and seizing pen and paper she wrote hurriedly, feverishly, then thrusting the sheet into an envelope she scribbled an address and rang the bell.

"Send this directly to Captain Stuart at the Hotel Bristol," she said to the servant who answered it. "You understand? directly."

"Yes, madame," he answered and left the room, the letter in his hand.

CHAPTER VII

TWO RESTAURANTS

As the clocks in Paris finished chiming the quarter after eight, two men sat down to dinner at one of the perfectly appointed little tables in Paillard's restaurant. One was tall and thin; his silver hair most carefully *soigné* and his dress of an extreme elegance. The other was shorter and of much more wiry build. There was nothing superfine about his costume, but the extreme neatness of his whole person seemed to denote a bachelor and a man of the world.

"I wish Mme. la Duchesse would have joined us," said the taller of the two men, as he shook out his dinner napkin. "When I called at the Bristol to make sure that you had arrived, and found that she had come over also, I at once sent a note entreating her presence, but she pleaded fatigue."

"Yes, I fear she is very tired," his companion answered, "she scarcely spoke between Calais and Paris."

"*Vraiment?* Yet I remember that madame has as much conversation as a Frenchwoman, and a great deal more common-sense! What an English quality that is!"

"You think so?" said the Englishman. "Then you could have reassured the Scotch minister who in a stirring sermon said to his flock, 'Ma freends, ye may git grace by faith, and ye may git knowledge by learning, but I dinna ken wha ye'll git common-sense.'"

The Duc d'Othmar laughed.

"Common-sense," he said, "is like corn: the gods send it, but whether the ground upon which it falls will grow it or not is another matter. I am glad that the duchess has come," and he helped himself to an *entrée* with the reassured air of a holder of stocks in which a rise has been notified.

"I hope she may be able to do something," Sir Charles Davenant responded in a tone that suggested, not hope, but doubt.

"Women always do something," d'Oth-

mar answered, with the conviction of a man who understood the sex.

"But will it do any good?" asked Sir Charles, who appeared unable to be hopeful save in words.

"Good and evil are merely relative terms," d'Othmar responded, "and everything in the *maison* Dubosc being so evil, anything from outside must, it is clear, be relatively good."

"Are things worse?" Sir Charles queried anxiously.

"Emotions are cumulative," the Frenchman answered, with the detached air of a professor of psychology. "They are also explosive, and when a certain cumulation is attained they explode."

"You think that point has been reached?"

The Duc d'Othmar raised his wine-glass to his lips and emptied it before he answered.

"In my opinion," he said slowly, "the situation is already tinder, and de Courchamps carries the matches."

The Englishman's shrewd, kindly eyes grew very grave.

"God help that poor child!" he said.

"Amen to that," d'Othmar responded,

and his voice, too, was low and earnest. "And besides, since heaven is a long way from Paris, may the duchess, and you and I, my friend, be heaven's agents."

"Amen to that also," Sir Charles said fervently, and they finished their meal in silence.

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Meanwhile in another restaurant somewhat less well appointed, two men of very different appearance were also dining, and talking also of the lady for whom the Duc d'Othmar and Sir Charles Davenant had just invoked God's help and their own. In appearance they differed widely from the two men seated at the small round table *chez* Paillard. Both were, it is true, dressed with excessive care, but this excess did not make for elegance. It rather suggested that the habit of wearing evening clothes had been acquired a little late. One of these men was Gaston Dubosc; the other, rotund of face and figure, with shifty eyes, loose lips, and a constant habit of rubbing his small fat hands softly together, was his guest, M. Sylvestre Legros.

Their dinner-hour had been earlier than that of d'Othmar and Sir Charles, and as the

entrées were handed *chez* Paillard, M. Dubosc produced his cigarette case, and opening it with a sharp snap, offered it to his guest.

"A thousand thanks," M. Legros murmured.

Dubosc handed him the matches; his own cigarette was lighted, and for a moment or two they smoked in silence. It was broken by Dubosc.

"This English milord—he comes, does he not?" he asked, and his eyes were eager.

"But certainly; he has seen madame," Legros replied concisely.

"Ah—and he finds her beautiful?" Dubosc queried.

Legros waved his hand above his head with the leer of a fat satyr pointing heavenward.

"As an angel," he responded. "Ah, my friend, if it were not for the angels, how should we poor devils prosper?"

"They are certainly convenient—to those who know how to use them," Dubosc answered. "I was quite right, I knew that Madonna mien meant money," and he leant back in his chair with the satisfied air of a connoisseur who has made a clever deal.

"I should think so," Legros exclaimed, "you must be making a perfect fortune. What do they care for losing money now that they can look at madame? Why, every one of her golden hairs is worth a golden louis to you, my friend; and then, too, all is so *bien vu* since d'Othmar comes."

"Yes, his presence is certainly a *cachet*, even if it is a trifle tiresome at times," Dubosc replied reflectively.

His friend started forward in his chair.

"Tiresome! What are you saying? Have you lost your head? I tell you that not all the beauty of madame could have got this young milord to your house to-night had I not told him that M. le Duc was your constant guest. The name of d'Othmar is a great name in England as in France; a name to conjure with—and win."

Dubosc nodded. "Yes; great names and great beauty are good tools," he agreed. "But about this young English milord. He is rich?—very rich? You are sure?"

"A Crœsus, my friend."

"Ah, that is good. And his écarté, you say, is bad?"

M. Legros shrugged his shoulders and spread out his short, fat hands as one who indicates a fathomless abyss.

"His écarté, my friend? It does not exist," he answered.

"Good," Dubosc said again, and he threw away the end of his cigarette. "But this tutor? Does he accompany the young milord?"

"Do you take me for an imbecile?" Legros exclaimed. "The tutor saw madame at the theatre, as did milord. I spoke of you as a gentleman of independent means whose beautiful wife gave charming receptions. As a great favour I procure for milord the honour of an invitation; for the tutor—no. The receptions of madame are select. Admission of a difficulty—" he paused, shrugged his shoulders, and lighted another cigarette. "*Enfin*," he continued, "the affair is arranged."

"You are an artist, my friend!" Dubosc exclaimed appreciatively. "You met this young milord at Monte Carlo, did you not?"

"Yes; I did him some service in reclaiming for him a large sum he had won at the tables, and upon which the lean fingers of that insati-

able old Croizette had closed resolutely. Had his French been good, she would have been deaf; but his French resembles his écarté, so she was but uncomprehending; so was the *croupier*. I intervened and arranged matters for him—and for myself; he won his money, I his gratitude, and trust."

"And the tutor?" Dubosc asked again.

M. Legros blew a cloud of cigarette smoke upwards before he answered.

"The tutor," he said slowly, "appears altogether insensible to my personal charm; he feels, however, that it is impossible to doubt the good qualities and good faith of a man who has recovered twenty thousand francs for his pupil."

"It was clever; very clever," Dubosc said meditatively, "but Croizette will not love you, my friend."

"I trust not. Her friendship would be compromising; her hatred is a testimonial."

Dubosc laughed.

"And you want all you can get, *hein?*" he responded as he pushed back his chair from the table and glanced at his watch.

"It is time we were going," he said.

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The other rose.

"I am ready," he answered, and he followed his host to the door of the restaurant, where a cab awaited them.

"*Avenue Champs Elysée, numero 900 bis,*" said Dubosc, and the little carriage rattled swiftly away.

CHAPTER VIII

AS ON A LENS

"THAT will do, Ernestine," said the Duchess of Deerham when her maid had industriously brushed her luxuriant hair for nearly twenty minutes, "you can go to bed now, and come to me at eight to-morrow morning."

"Yes, madame," the Frenchwoman answered, and she gave one or two swift, deft touches to the toilet appurtenances on the table before her and left the room. The duchess, however, did not move. She was thinking deeply. Suddenly she raised her eyes and met her own reflection in the glass.

"Selfish, forgetful, cruel!" she said, and with a remorseful sigh she rose and walked restlessly about the room. It was a large one and the disposition of its furniture such as to leave ample space for movement. The bed stood in an alcove, and the tables, chairs, and

sofa were so arranged as to give free scope for the uneasy footsteps treading to and fro. Sir Charles Davenant had been right; the duchess was very tired, as the dark lines beneath the heavy eyelids betrayed; yet what use to lay a head upon the pillow when the thoughts within that head are travelling at lightning speed through time and space. She had reached that stage of tired tension when the brain appears a lens upon which photographs of the past are thrown with startling swiftness. The face she had seen reflected in her mirror with its weary eyes and sad mouth, was no longer before her. She was again a laughing girl, back in her childhood's home in the midst of the Berkshire Downs. How fresh and free it had been, that childhood of hers! The great grey house unhampered by avenues or gardens stood out ruggedly in the midst of the green park lands that merged imperceptibly into the downs beyond. What gallops she had had over their springy turf, watching the trial of her father's racehorses! Again she felt her eager cob straining at his bridle, and there beside her, the soft, fair hair blown about the delicate face, flushed and quivering with excitement as the

great blue eyes followed the thoroughbreds in front of them, was Alice Merton. To Helen Deerham no scene of her childhood seemed complete without her. They had worked together, played together, idled together. The duchess sighed. Marriage had divided them.

Another scene rose upon the lens. The great doors of Westminster Abbey that open only for royalty and for brides, were thrown wide, the organ pealed loudly, and over the red carpet the marriage procession moved slowly up the nave. Immediately behind the dark-haired bride came the same fair-haired girl. Six months later she herself was a bride. Once more Helen Deerham sighed, shortly, sharply, impatiently.

"Why did she marry a parson?" she said aloud, "and such a parsonic parson too. Clergy should always be celibate. Their hearts should go to heaven with their souls."

The fair face was still before her, but even as she looked it changed: the eyes grew deeper, fuller, the delicate curls no longer clustered about neck and brow; the soft hair was parted and pushed back from either side of the smooth white forehead, giving the look of a

Madonna to the pure oval face. To Helen Deerham it seemed that the sweet face bent low over a child's bed; in it lay a little dark-haired girl, her face flushed with fever, as she tossed restlessly to and fro. Suddenly the child's eyes opened, the little arms were flung out—"Auntie, Auntie Alice, hold me," cried a weak gasping little voice, and as she spoke the gentle arms went round her, the soft voice whispered soothing words. Tears stood in Helen Deerham's eyes: and another scene flashed across the lens. She saw herself standing with her husband in the garden of the Villa Serbelloni at Bellagio, just above the Devil's Leap: they were looking down across the dense blue of the lake to the glorious hills beyond it, golden in the sunshine and purple where the shadows fell. The sound of a step upon the gravel path behind them broke the stillness: they turned and saw that the waiter had followed them up from the Villa—he held two telegrams upon his tray. She remembered how she had seized them swiftly, some undefinable, unreasoning fear clutching at her heart; hastily she had torn the first open: it was from her old housekeeper. "Lady Vio-

let ill. Fear scarlet fever. Have telegraphed to Mrs. Aylmer." Quickly she had handed the flimsy paper to her husband, and her trembling fingers had drawn the second sheet from its envelope. Its date was but some half hour later than that of the housekeeper's. "Am starting for the castle. Don't be alarmed. Alice," it said.

Then through her tears Helen Deerham saw scene after scene of her hurried journey home pass in swift succession upon the never-erring lens of memory, until at last she stood within her own hall-door and heard dimly, as though spoken from a great distance, the doctor's words: "The danger is past," he said, "Mrs. Aylmer's nursing has saved her." With a cry Helen Deerham covered her eyes with her hands and sank down upon a chair. Alice had saved her child, had left her home, her own baby daughter to go to the bedside of fever, and what had she, Helen Deerham, done in return? She had forgotten her friend, forgotten that friend's child, forgotten everything in the wide world save her own sorrow. Her child was dead: what could it matter to her that the earth was teeming with population,

that millions lived, and suffered; her child was dead; the world was empty; she had rebelled against God and man; why had they not let her die also? For her life held no farther meaning: death alone could restore what death had taken. She had scarcely eaten or slept, for surely, she had thought, death would be merciful and take her also. Then, suddenly her husband had fallen ill—day and night she had watched beside him, fighting for him the death that for herself she courted; and when at last the crisis was past and her husband had come slowly back to life, she had taken up her own life again. Since she could not die she had resolved that she would live as she had lived before; she had never had a mind for middle courses; there should be no pulling; she could tolerate no sympathy; the past was past. Then it was that she and her husband had gone to America and there she had heard of Mrs. Aylmer's death. She had envied her: then she had recollected that *her* daughter was not dead, and she had wondered if Alice could be happy in heaven leaving her child on earth. She had been very sorry for the girl and had written to her; she would have

sent for her to join them, but there had been the father, and it all seemed a long way off—everything had seemed a long way off except her own sorrow. Then had come the girl's letter, telling of her father's death and of her own marriage which the father had arranged. She had sent her some jewels and had hoped she would be happy. Why had she not gone to her, as Alice had gone to her Violet? she asked herself remorsefully. She should have remembered that Mr. Aylmer's thoughts were ever too much bent on things of heaven to be of any help to those on earth.

"God forgive me, and help her!" she cried, and she fell upon her knees and prayed.

CHAPTER IX

CARDS

In the Duboscs' salon the electric light was turned on, card-tables, with unopened packs of cards were laid out, a tray containing decanters, syphons, and tumblers stood upon the writing-table, and the servant, having drawn the curtains across the big bay window, had gone over to the fireplace and had stirred the smouldering logs into a bright blaze. As the flame flared up a door opened and Mme. Dubosc came hurriedly into the room.

"Has not the answer to my note come yet, Henri?" she asked anxiously.

"Not yet, madame," the man answered.

As he spoke a bell rang.

"Ah, perhaps that is it. Go and see," she cried.

He left the room and Alice Dubosc tapped

her foot impatiently upon the marble kerb of the fireplace as she waited.

The door opened again and the man returned bearing a note upon a small silver salver. She tore it open. It had no beginning and was signed by two initials only. "Let me know somehow this evening when and where to meet you," it said. "I have wired to an old servant of my mother's who lives at Versailles to expect a cousin of mine, so write time and place upon a slip of paper and give it to me. If you have no opportunity of doing so, I will make one by calling for fresh cards and asking you to hand them to me for luck; you will bring it to me. D. S."

Her eyes devoured the words feverishly; then she hurried to the writing-table: upon it stood the tray of decanters; nothing else.

With an impatient exclamation she drew a little jewelled pencil from one of the bangles on her wrist and tried to open the drawer of the table. It was locked. As she pulled at it the door opened and her husband and M. Legros came in.

"Ah, *ma chère*, dressed in good time, I see," Dubosc said urbanely, as his quick eye

scanned every detail of her dainty blue gown with its filmy clouds of lace.

"Good evening, madame," said Legros, "I am a little early, I fear, but your husband and I have been dining together, and——"

"No, no, it is not early," Dubosc said, and he glanced at the clock upon the mantelpiece. His wife's eyes followed his, and she started as she saw the hour to which the hands pointed.

"Oh, no, it is not early," she said nervously, "but—but I have forgotten my—my handkerchief—if monsieur will excuse me?" she turned to Legros.

"But of course, madame," he said bowing; Dubosc, however, cut him short.

"Nonsense, my dear. If you want a handkerchief send for one—your guests are arriving and you must stay here," he said peremptorily, and even as he spoke the door was thrown open and the servant announced:

"M. le Duc d'Othmar. Sir Charles Davenant."

Mme. Dubosc turned to greet them and Sir Charles's kindly eyes clouded as they met hers. "She looks like a trapped thing," he

muttered to himself. D'Othmar was bowing over the hand she had extended to him.

"Dear madame, how charming you are this evening!" he said; "the angels' colour is indeed your own."

"Angels have wings, monsieur; I, alas! have none," she answered.

"By the mercy of Heaven, madame," he responded.

A shadowy smile crossed her lips, and as d'Othmar extended two fingers to M. Dubosc and bowed stiffly to Legros, she turned to Sir Charles.

"You have soon returned to Paris," she said.

"Yes; I came back to escort an old friend of yours and of mine," he answered, "the Duchess of Deerham."

Alice Dubosc started.

"The Duchess of Deerham," she exclaimed, and she looked from Sir Charles to d'Othmar, who had as speedily as possible turned his back upon his host and rejoined his hostess.

"*Mais oui*," the Frenchman said, and urbane approval rang in the full round tones of

his voice, "*Mais oui.* Our friend Sir Charles, it appears, mentioned to her that he had had the honour of meeting you; it seems that she adores you, dear madame, that she is longing to see you, and has come to Paris *exprès.* But Sir Charles will tell you," he turned to the Englishman as he spoke.

"I thought she had forgotten," Alice Dubosc said slowly.

"Madame, the duchess never forgets," Sir Charles responded gravely. "Her life has always been a very full one; the claims upon her time, her interests, occupations, are innumerable, and latterly, as you know, a great shadow has darkened her life; but in sorrow or happiness, although she may seem sometimes to ignore, she forgets nothing. Friendship, facts, apparently buried in oblivion, are but laid aside, carefully wrapped in the silver paper of memory, kept fresh and untarnished."

"It is very good of the duchess to remember me," Alice Dubosc said nervously. "Does——"

The opening of the door to admit fresh guests interrupted her sentence; she turned to receive the newcomers; two Frenchmen, M. le

Marquis de Grandcour and M. Duran, and two Englishmen; the first, a good-looking young soldier, Mr. Forster, and just behind him, towering head and shoulders above the Frenchmen, Dick Stuart. His eyes met hers for an instant as he took her hand, then he joined d'Othmar, who was toying with an open pack of cards, two of which lay upon the mantelpiece. The Frenchman held out his hand.

"So you come always," he said in a curiously low, level tone.

Dick laughed uncomfortably.

"When you do," he answered.

"Only then?" the other queried, and he glanced round the room.

Mme. Dubosc and her husband were engrossed by the arrival of fresh guests, and Sir Charles Davenant was absorbed in watching madame. D'Othmar laid his hand affectionately on Dick's shoulder.

"*Mon ami*," he said, and his voice was low and grave, "I am an old man, and your father was my friend. I know my world: it has three ways to ruin—wine, cards, and women. The quickest, fairest, and most irretrievable is

woman." He turned away and joined one of the groups that were forming about the card-tables; as he did so Mme. Dubosc made a step towards Dick, but at the same moment the servant announced,

"Lord Miltimber, M. le Comte René de Courchamps."

She hesitated, and as she paused a hand closed like a vice upon her elbow and her husband's voice said in her ear:

"Did you not hear, *chérie?*"

She shivered slightly, and turning, bowed mechanically to the tall, loose-limbed youth who had just come in. He, however, put out his hand, and with a quick glance at the frank, boyish face, she gave him hers, without heeding M. Legros's eager words of introduction.

"Hallo, Milwheel, who'd have thought of seeing you here?" said youg Forster. "Didn't know you had left Eton."

"Oh, come now, Forster," Lord Miltimber expostulated, but Dubosc intervened. He wished to present his new guest to the Duc d'Othmar. His wife moved back against the mantelpiece to let him pass her and leant one

arm upon it; she held her fan and gloves in her hand, and it rested upon one of the open packs of cards.

Dick was talking to de Grandcour and Jack Forster: Alice Dubosc's eyes were watching him and, as she watched, her fingers slipped from her fan on to the cards. A low penetrating voice just behind her made her start violently; she withdrew her hand sharply, and with it, beneath the fan, lay a card. It was René de Courchamps who had spoken.

"Still thinking of the postscript to our *tête-à-tête*, madame?" he said sneeringly. "You wish perhaps to warn M. le Capitaine of that little bullet through the lungs awaiting him?"

"I do not understand you, monsieur," she answered coldly. Yet her lips trembled.

His sneer assumed the semblance of a smile.

"*Vraiment.* Then perhaps after all I was too hasty this afternoon, and monsieur is not yet—" he paused and shot a swift glance in Dick's direction; at the same moment the Englishman turned sharply round, and his forehead contracted angrily as he saw who Alice's companion was.

De Courchamps smiled.

"I shall remember your English proverb," he said, "'Faint heart never won fair lady.'" He turned to Dick Stuart. "You will give me my revenge to-night, monsieur, *n'est-ce pas?*" he said suavely.

Dick started.

"I fear, monsieur, that is impossible," he answered stiffly. "I merely looked in for a few moments this evening to say good-bye to M. and Mme. Dubosc before returning to England. I go to-morrow morning and, as I must pack to-night, I have time only for a short game with M. le Duc——"

De Courchamps interrupted him.

"I understand," he said, and his sneering tones rang coldly clear. "Monsieur very naturally wishes to take back to England the ten thousand francs he won from me last night."

There was a scarcely perceptible pause; a pause noted only by Alice Dubosc; the other men in the room were chatting and laughing as they arranged their card parties; M. Duran had just called the attention of de Grandcour, and Jack Forster was listening to their talk; no one had heard de Courchamps's words.

"You are wrong, monsieur," Dick said quietly. "In case of a storm it is always well to rid the ship of base metal. Shall we sit here?" and he turned to a table beside him. "We play the usual points, I suppose?"

"As you will," de Courchamps answered nonchalantly, and drawing a chair to the table, he tore the paper from one of the packs of cards laid thereon.

D'Othmar came over to Alice Dubosc's side.

"And our patience, madame?" he said, with a little wave of the hand to the two packs of cards that lay upon the chimney-piece.

"Oh, not to-night, monsieur," she said, "I am tired. Let us talk." She seated herself, as she spoke, upon a sofa which stood opposite the table at which de Courchamps and Dick Stuart were playing écarté. D'Othmar seated himself beside her, and Sir Charles Davenant, who had been watching Lord Miltimber's play, drew a chair up to the side of the sofa.

"What message shall I take to the duchess, madame?" he asked.

"Oh, tell her— Give her my love, and—

and say that—that I think it so good of her to remember me," she answered nervously.

"And when will she find you at home?" he asked.

"When—will she find me—at home?" Alice repeated. "I—I don't know—I mean any time—of course, she must fix her own time."

"Perhaps you and the duchess would lunch with me to-morrow?" d'Othmar suggested, "and you too, *mon ami, cela va sans dire,*" he added, turning to Sir Charles.

"Oh, thanks; I shall be delighted. The duchess thought that perhaps Mme. Dubosc might be able to see her about eleven o'clock to-morrow morning, and if that is convenient—" he paused and looked interrogatively at Alice.

"Oh, certainly; any time," she answered quickly. "Does the duchess stay long in Paris?"

"That, I believe, depends upon you."

"Upon me?"

"Yes; she hopes to persuade you to pay her a little visit—to return with her to England."

Alice started and glanced nervously to-

wards the table at which her husband was playing cards with Lord Miltimber.

"The duchess is most kind," she said quickly; "but I am afraid I—M. Dubosc would not——"

Sir Charles interrupted her.

"The duchess's powers of persuasion are great," he said, "and she hopes to prevail upon M. Dubosc to spare you for a time."

A sudden light of hope leapt to Alice's eyes. Then it clouded, died; doubt, and some nameless fear had thrust it forth.

"*Chère madame,*" said d'Othmar, "the great rule of life, established by careful psychological study of the female sex, is that one woman should never trust another. The Duchess of Deerham is the exception establishing the rule. Trust her and—leave everything to her."

She looked at him in bewilderment; but his smile told her nothing. He turned away, and putting up his glasses, fixed them upon the table at which Count de Courchamps and Dick Stuart were seated.

"De Courchamps seems more *en veine* tonight," he said.

"Ah, he plays a great deal, does he not?" Sir Charles queried.

"A great deal more, it sometimes appears, than either his temper or his fortune can well endure," d'Othmar responded, and he shrugged his shoulders expressively as he returned to his seat beside Mme. Dubosc. "He counts, however, upon succeeding to the fortune of his uncle, the Marquis de St. Ouen."

"Ah, yes. It is a fine property, I believe," Sir Charles commented.

"It is; and I only trust that, with the property, St. Ouen may bequeath his amiable temper and admirable manner; the nephew needs both."

"So I have heard. A great duellist, isn't he? Invincible, they tell me."

D'Othmar made a gesture of assent.

"He is the finest swordsman in Europe," he said.

The fan with which Mme. Dubosc had been toying shut with a sharp click.

"Is that true?" she asked quickly.

"Perfectly. Do you wish him to show you a little *jeu d'escrime*," d'Othmar said, smiling.

She shivered.

"Oh, no! I hate duelling and everything connected with it," she cried.

Sir Charles Davenant's eyes were fixed upon de Courchamps.

"He is as good with pistols as with swords, is he not?" he said.

"He is extraordinary," d'Othmar answered.

Alice Dubosc turned to Sir Charles.

"Do you shoot?" she asked abruptly.

"Pheasants, madame; not men," he answered with a smile.

"You see, duelling is forbidden in your amiable country, madame," said d'Othmar.

"Yes, I know; but—but cannot *any* Englishmen shoot and fence?" she queried.

Again Sir Charles smiled.

"We shoot well enough to place game upon our table, and some of us fence well enough to keep ourselves warm on a cold winter's day. But as an art—for that, madame, you must certainly, as d'Othmar suggests, appeal to M. de Courchamps."

"But I told you that I detested the whole thing," she exclaimed petulantly, and she rose and stood beside the mantelpiece,

her foot tapping the marble kerb impatiently.

D'Othmar shrugged his shoulders. "And yet," he murmured *sotto voce* to Sir Charles, "it is for women that we fight."

"When it is not for anything else," the Englishman rejoined.

D'Othmar smiled.

"You are cynical, *mon cher*," he said.

"Possibly. I have lived in all the capitals of Europe, and I have found that while woman is sometimes a reason, she is always an excuse."

He turned to Mme. Dubosc. She was looking down at the mantelpiece, and, as he turned, she raised her eyes suddenly and in the mirror that stood above the fireplace Sir Charles saw that her look met that of Dick Stuart's; then her eyes fell, and replacing a little jewelled pencil which dangled from the bracelet on her wrist, she rang the bell. "Our coffee is late," she said, and she resumed her seat beside d'Othmar.

"It would be late in England," said Sir Charles, "but in Paris one drinks coffee at all hours. The force of example, I suppose."

"You English think so much of example," d'Othmar commented; "you ought really to be grateful to us for setting you one."

As he spoke, coffee was brought in and handed to them. D'Othmar put a large spoonful of sugar into his cup, and Sir Charles did the same.

"Imitation is the sincerest flattery," he remarked as he did so.

"Ah, what a people of ideals you are," d'Othmar exclaimed. "With us flattery does not profess sincerity; it would be a misfit, would it not, madame?"

Alice's eyes had been bent upon the card-table nearest them; she started as d'Othmar addressed her.

"Sincerity? Oh, sincerity is plain and very English," she said, "and flattery is very pretty and very French, is it not?"

D'Othmar smiled.

"And you prefer the English quality, madame," he said. "You are right; for you the French word and the English blend. Sincerity cannot flatter, and flattery grows sincere."

The sound of a mass of cards falling upon the table near them broke through his words.

He looked up; Dick Stuart's chair grated upon the parquet floor as he turned it in the direction of the sofa.

"Let us have fresh cards," he exclaimed. "I have no luck to-night. Perhaps madame will give them to me, and so bring me good fortune?" He rose from his chair as he spoke. Mme. Dubosc also rose, and it seemed to Sir Charles that her face was white and thin. D'Othmar had been wrong, he thought; she should not wear blue.

Some spare packs of cards were lying on a table behind the sofa. Alice Dubosc picked up two of them and crossed over to the card-table. How she hated the whole thing, Sir Charles thought, as he watched her. She was trembling with nervousness; it made her positively awkward. She actually took the cards in the hand that held her fan and gloves. He turned to d'Othmar.

"I saw Walter Stuart yesterday," he said abruptly; "he wants Dick home."

"Then it seems that he will have his wish," was the quiet rejoinder. "Dick says he goes to-morrow."

"H'm—I hope he will," said Sir Charles.

"But of course," d'Othmar responded suavely, "you English are so exact."

Sir Charles did not answer. It is possible that he believed his knowledge of his countrymen to equal that of the Duc d'Othmar.

Mme. Dubosc meanwhile had torn the paper from one of the packs of cards.

"I will open it just to insure the luck," she said, and she handed the pack to Dick Stuart as she spoke. Then she went back to her seat, and it seemed to Sir Charles that her light footsteps lagged upon the polished boards.

"And so, madame, you are going to England?" said d'Othmar as he arranged a cushion for her.

She shook her head.

"I do not think M. Dubosc will—be able to spare me," she said.

"Who could, madame? Yet even husbands must sometimes make sacrifices."

"Sometimes!" Sir Charles echoed. "I thought it was always—with husbands."

D'Othmar arranged his eyeglass carefully, and the glance with which he surveyed his friend was critical.

"*Cher ami,* how can you tell?" he asked blandly. "You are not married."

"Exactly; that is why I do know. *I* never make any sacrifices and some one must."

D'Othmar laughed.

"True, very true," he said, "self-sacrifice is a necessity and it ennobles the soul; it is very suitable to husbands."

As he spoke he set down his coffee-cup on a small table standing beside the sofa and turned to look at the card-tables. Lord Miltimber seemed but little engrossed in his game, his eyes wandered constantly towards the sofa. Jack Forster, on the other hand, who was playing piquet with de Grandcour, never raised his eyes from the cards, and M. Duran and M. Legros were also absorbed in their game, as apparently was de Courchamps, but Dick Stuart's face was flushed, and he was playing hurriedly—nervously. It was his deal, and it seemed to d'Othmar that de Courchamps appeared peculiarly interested in the fall of the cards, so intently did his eyes follow them. Suddenly he sprang to his feet.

"I refuse to continue the game," he cried.

"M. le Capitaine has a card concealed in the sleeve of his coat. I distinctly saw it!"

Dick jumped up furiously, and M. Dubosc rushing over from his table, hurried to de Courchamps's side.

"*Cher monsieur, que dîtes-vous?* Consider. Calm yourself, I entreat," he said imploringly.

All the other men had laid down their cards and d'Othmar and Sir Charles went over to Dick. Neither noticed that Mme. Dubosc, who had also risen, tried to follow them, faltered, and would have fallen had she not caught at the high-backed chair in which Sir Charles had been seated.

"Tell him he's a damned liar, Dick," Jack Forster cried.

De Courchamps bowed sarcastically.

"It is unnecessary, monsieur," he said suavely, "if M. le Capitaine has nothing concealed in the sleeve of his coat, let him shake out the handkerchief now reposing so snugly in his cuff, and I will make him my most profound apologies. I was perhaps mistaken in thinking that I perceived a card drop from the pack handed to him by madame. The hand-

kerchief was then upon his knee, now it is within his cuff. I only ask to see."

"I'm hanged if you shall," Dick cried. "You have chosen to insult me and I shall send a friend to you to-morrow morning."

With a little stifled cry Mme. Dubosc made a movement towards the table, but her strength failed her; again she clutched at the chair for support, missed it, and fell forward. D'Othmar, who had turned quickly as she cried out, contrived to catch her, and Sir Charles and M. Dubosc hurried to his assistance. Dick gave one glance in her direction, clenched his hands, and remained where he was, facing de Courchamps, the table, and the cards between them.

"Ah, these nerves!" M. Dubosc exclaimed fussily, "a thousand thanks, M. le Duc. We will take her in here, and I will summon her maid." He drew back the portière which screened the entrance to an adjoining room as he spoke, and d'Othmar and Sir Charles carried Alice through the doorway and laid her on a couch.

"*Quel malheur!* I fear I have alarmed madame," de Courchamps said, and he stroked his moustache with an air savouring rather of

satisfaction than regret. "She need not, however, fear," he continued, "that I fight with monsieur. One can meet only men of honour."

With a movement of ungovernable rage, Dick Stuart thrust back the table upon the other side of which de Courchamps stood; he did not flinch, but de Grandcour and Duran threw themselves between the two men; as they did so Sir Charles, who with d'Othmar had just re-entered the room, laid a detaining hand upon Dick's arm. The impulse of brute force past, he made a desperate effort to control himself; but although he spoke quietly and deliberately, his voice was hoarse with passion.

"You will have to prove your case, monsieur," he said.

René de Courchamps laughed. "Prove it! You have proved it yourself, monsieur," and he tapped the sleeve of his own coat significantly as he spoke. "If you have nothing concealed here, within the folds of that silk handkerchief, you have but to give it one little shake, and you prove me a liar!" His eyes gleamed as they rested upon Dick's white, set

face, and the corners of his mouth hardened into a fixed smile. He paused, then, turning nonchalantly aside, he added softly, "You English are not, as a rule, so eager to accept insults."

Dick shut his teeth hard and an oath died in his throat.

"My dear Dick, why not humour him?" Sir Charles Davenant suggested, with studied urbanity. "You can knock him down afterwards."

Dick shook his head doggedly. "He has insulted me, and he shall pay for it," he said.

"But, my dear boy, that is the end; this is the beginning," d'Othmar said slowly. "Let us finish the beginning and then make an end. But a little disarrangement of the toilette and all will be arranged, and monsieur—disposed of." He made a slight, sarcastic bow in de Courchamps's direction as he spoke. It was returned by an obeisance of exaggerated courtesy.

Dick was silent.

"Hang it all, Stuart, cram the handkerchief down his throat," Jack Forster cried.

"Yes; make the fellow eat it!" Lord Miltimber exclaimed excitedly.

De Grandcour and Duran said nothing; they were standing somewhat apart, talking together in low tones.

"Ah, monsieur, consider, reflect—no scandal, I entreat," Dubosc murmured imploringly to de Courchamps, who, however, did not even feign to hear.

"It is so simple," he said: "I only ask monsieur to let me see——"

"I'm damned if I will!" Dick cried.

René de Courchamps turned again to the table, and looking straight across it, met the Englishman's eyes squarely.

"Ah, monsieur is wise," he said slowly, "could he but go home with that handkerchief—" His phrase was broken by a sudden movement of Stuart's, which would this time have upset the table and de Courchamps with it, had not Dubosc and M. Duran rushed forward in time to seize it, while Sir Charles Davenant seized Dick's arm.

"Keep your head, Dick," he said in quick, low tones. De Courchamps's smile deepened.

"Happily," he continued, "the handkerchief is an evidence altogether superfluous. I have said that it contains a card like those with which we play. Monsieur says no, and offers to fight. I, however, fight not for such a matter. The thing is clear; if he have the card, some pack must lack one, and there, on the mantelpiece before you, lies that pack." He pointed as he spoke to the two opened packs of cards, with which Mme. Dubosc was wont to play patience with d'Othmar. All eyes followed as his finger pointed; one of the two packs was precisely similar to that upon the table before them.

Dick's eyes also followed that pointing finger, and as they rested upon the pack, their set, stony look changed. The pupils dilated and darkened, and a slow horror grew in them as in the eyes of one looking into the mouth of hell. Dubosc broke the spell that seemed to hold his guests; he rushed over to the mantelpiece, and, seizing the pack, threw it beside that lying scattered on the table. The two packs were identical. De Courchamps took up the pack Dubosc had thrown down.

"*Tiens, messieurs! Nous verrons,*" he said. "This is, I believe, the patience pack of madame. It should contain, I think, fifty-two cards. M. le Duc will correct me if I am wrong?" He turned interrogatively to d'Othmar as he spoke, and the duke gave a gesture of assent. Lightly de Courchamps laid his finger and thumb upon the top card of the pack—then he paused.

"If the fifty-two cards are here," he said impressively, "I make my most humble apologies to M. le Capitaine and to you all. If not —*Pouf! Nous verrons.*"

One by one he let the cards fall upon the table, counting them as they touched the cloth; slowly the little heap grew higher, wider. "47—48—49," the numbers rang out clear and hard in de Courchamps's sharp tones through the silence of the room; the men who watched were still as death! The only sign of life lay in their eyes, which never veered from the cards. "50—51"—the last card fell upon the table; the pack was incomplete.

Suddenly the silence was broken roughly.

"But damn it! what's the card?" Jack Forster cried. His words struck the triumphal

security from de Courchamps's face, and his eyes shifted uneasily from one to another of the guests as his fingers fidgeted with the cards.

"Ah, precisely," d'Othmar said slowly, "monsieur is right," and he bowed to young Forster as he spoke. "The whole question lies there: what is the missing card? Probably one of no importance, dropped by chance. Madame and I need no precautions for our patience packs."

"Quite so, quite so; it's a mere chance," exclaimed Sir Charles.

"Exactly, a mere chance—an accident, *cher* monsieur," Dubosc echoed fussily, and he pressed de Courchamps's arm anxiously.

"Well, are you going to show us the missing card?" young Forster demanded.

Slowly, unwillingly, de Courchamps once more dealt out the pack, in suits this time. Card after card fell upon the green cloth. Hearts were completed, clubs, spades—the last card fell upon the table and René de Courchamps's laugh rang through the room.

"The missing card is the king of diamonds, messieurs," he said. "But perhaps this also can be explained?"

For an instant Dick Stuart faced him silently. Then,

"I refuse to answer insults," he said, and he strode from the room.

The smile deepened upon de Courchamps's face; he shrugged his shoulders and said something in a low tone to M. Duran, who responded curtly. Dubosc seized the pack and began to recount it feverishly.

"Are you going my way, Sir Charles?" d'Othmar asked.

"Yes, yes," he answered hurriedly.

Dubosc flung down the cards.

"Ah, messieurs, this lamentable occurrence—" he began in tones of desperate deprecation.

D'Othmar cut him short.

"Is to be regretted, monsieur," he said coldly. "It is doubtless possible to accustom oneself to such misadventures, but to me both opportunity and inclination have been lacking. You will therefore excuse me. Good-night." He bowed haughtily and left the room, followed by Sir Charles.

Dubosc pursued them into the anteroom, gesticulating and expostulating, but d'Othmar

did not turn his head, and the other guests seized the opportunity of their host's exit to hurry off themselves in search of hats and coats.

René de Courchamps alone remained. Before him lay the cards; his eyes gloated upon them. A slight movement at one side of the room made him turn his head suddenly. His look met that of Mme. Dubosc. She was standing just within the curtained doorway that led to the inner room. She was clinging to the frame of the door for support and her face was white as marble. René de Courchamps bowed low.

"*Chère* madame," he said, "we were playing écarté; it was kind of you to choose a king."

With a low cry Alice Dubosc fell forward, insensible, once more.

CHAPTER X

HER MESSAGE

RAIN had fallen, and the wet pavements shone darkly under the bright lights of the Avenue des Champs Elysées; overhead the sky was dark and lowering, and the little French carriages scuttled heedlessly down the broad roadway, regardless of the foot passengers, also hurrying along, anxious to reach some shelter ere the rain should be once more upon them.

One man, however, saw neither the brilliant light as it caught the wet flags, nor yet the heavy threatening clouds. With bent head and contracted forehead he strode on at a pace which made the haste of other flurried foot passengers seem impotent fuss.

"Good God! to write upon a card!" he said within himself. He saw nothing, felt nothing, knew nothing, before and beyond

that card. It was the end of his past, the symbol of his present, the augur of his future.

He strode on: would he never reach the Bois—never escape from the rush and rattle of the carriage wheels, from the jostling of the objectless men and women pushing past him in pursuit of some such futile quest as home or food? At that moment it seemed to Dick Stuart that hunger, thirst, sickness, sorrow were as feathers in the scale of life: a card had weighed it down and the world held no balance weight. Suddenly a thought occurred to him: until then he had not thought: he had only felt, and had rushed like a suffering animal for some place where he could hide himself and be alone with his pain. For man, however, what place more lonely could be found than his own room in a great French hotel? What a fool he was: if he took a *fiacre* he would get there far sooner than in this vast city he could find a lamp remote enough from the haunts of men for him to take out the handkerchief into which he had thrust the card without risk of its falling at the feet of some chance passer-by. His action followed his thought; he hailed a little

carriage that passed him at the moment, and was driven swiftly away towards the Place Vendôme.

"Good God, what a position!" he groaned within himself. "While she is there I am tied hand and foot. Once let me get her away and the whole world may know; till then——"

He broke off short. "They must all think me a blackguard," he muttered. His mouth set resolutely and his fingers tightened on the card.

"Thank heaven, it can't be long," he said. "Perhaps to-morrow——"

The little carriage rattled under the archway, and jumping out he called to the concierge to pay the man, and strode upstairs.

"Monsieur," the concierge called after him, "monsieur, monsieur," but he paid no heed.

There would be light in his room and he could read that card. He turned the handle of his door: the electric light was already on: it fell upon the face of Jack Forster as he stood with his back to the fireplace, smoking

a cigar. At the sound of the opening door he turned quickly.

"Oh, there you are, Dick," he exclaimed. "I hope you don't mind my coming."

"Oh—of course not." The answer came slowly, unwillingly.

"I—you know we're such old friends," young Forster continued a little uneasily, "and—and I couldn't help just coming round to—to see how you were getting along, don't you know."

"Awfully good of you, old chap," Dick answered absently, "but I'm sorry you bothered. You see, I've a lot of things to see to, and——"

"Yes, of course—I know," Jack interrupted, "but I say, Dick, you'll let me be your second, won't you?"

Captain Stuart stared at him silently for a moment: then he broke into a bitter laugh.

"My second! Oh, my dear boy, we must wait a bit. You heard de Courchamps decline to meet me."

"Yes, damn him!" Jack answered grimly, and ground his heel into the carpet as he

spoke. "But, I say, Dick, why the devil didn't you knock him down?"

Captain Stuart stretched out his hand for a cigar, and turned to strike a match before he answered.

"We are in France, you see," he said evasively.

"Yes, but hang it all——"

Captain Stuart took his cigar from his lips.

"Now look here, Jack," he said decidedly, "it's awfully good of you to come and look me up when a lot of fellows would turn on their heels and shake the dust off their patent pumps, but——"

"Oh, come now, Dick," young Forster broke in, "I know I'm a bit of an ass, but I'm not quite such a damned ass as to believe you keep cards up your sleeve just because a blackguard like de Courchamps chooses to say so."

Captain Stuart turned away.

"You saw him count out that pack," he said, slowly and uncomfortably.

"Oh, that's nothing! Just a clever bit of juggling, that's all."

Dick threw his arm round the boy's shoulder.

"You're a real good friend, old chap," he exclaimed. "But I don't want you mixed up in this business. There's bound to be a nasty row, and you're better out of it."

"But I want to be in it, Dick," the boy cried plaintively.

"Then let want be your master for once, old fellow," Dick answered resolutely, "and don't think me an ungrateful brute if you can help it. You will know all about it some day —it can't be long." He sighed impatiently and glanced at the clock. As he did so, some one knocked at the door.

"Oh, come in," he cried irritably. Was he never to be alone?

The newcomer came forward hesitatingly. It was Lord Miltimber.

"I—I beg your pardon, Captain Stuart," he said, "perhaps I have no business here, but Forster told me he was coming——"

"Yes, and told you to go home," Jack Forster broke in angrily.

"Yes, I know; but somehow it didn't seem the square thing to do. I'm not much

good at French and that sort of thing, and I ain't anything of a card-player, but I wasn't going home without saying that—that of course one don't believe a word that damned scoundrel said."

"Thanks, awfully," said Dick, and he put out his hand.

Lord Miltimber grasped it with enthusiasm.

"It's time you were in bed, Milwheel," young Forster crushingly remarked.

"Look here, Forster, we ain't at Eton now."

"No, but you ought to be," said Jack.

"Oh, come, I say——"

Captain Stuart interrupted him. If the two boys got into a wrangle he would never get rid of them, he thought.

"Have a drink," he said, and he went over to a table upon which stood a tray containing a bottle of whisky, some soda water, and a couple of glasses.

"Ring for another glass, Jack," he said as he handed one of the two upon the tray to Lord Miltimber.

Jack put his hand out to the bell, but be-

fore he touched it the door opened and a waiter came in with a card.

"M. le Marquis de Grandcour begs that monsieur will see him for a little moment," he said.

Dick smothered an oath.

"Oh, bring him up," he said, somewhat unnecessarily, as it appeared, for scarcely were the words out of his mouth than de Grandcour was in the room.

"A thousand pardons, monsieur, that I thus venture to disturb you! I come but to express my regret at the so unfortunate occurrence of to-night. I have lived much in England, and have enjoyed the hospitality of your amiable father and of yourself. I regret that M. de Courchamps and M. Dubosc are my compatriots. It is unfortunate that monsieur, as a stranger, should have become acquainted with them. For us, who know and are known, it is different, but strangers do not understand." An expressive shrug of the shoulders ended this voluble speech.

"It is good of you to come, monsieur," Captain Stuart answered formally. "May I

give you some whisky and soda? Where on earth are those glasses, Jack?"

Young Forster rang the bell, and de Grandcour seated himself at the table.

With a sigh of helplessness Dick handed him a box of cigars: the waiter brought in the glasses and some more soda water. Would these men stay all night? Dick wondered.

De Grandcour set down his glass.

"My friend," he said seriously, "if these gentlemen will permit, may I have a little word with you?" He glanced from Lord Miltimber to Jack Forster as he spoke. The latter immediately gulped down all that remained of his whisky and soda.

"Oh, we must be going. Come along, Milwheel. Good-night, Dick, and if you should change your mind, you know you——"

"Thanks, Jack, I shan't forget," Captain Stuart answered, and he grasped the boy's hand warmly.

"Per—perhaps you will let me leave my card," Lord Miltimber said eagerly, "if I can be of any use, only too proud, don't you know!"

"Oh, shut up, Milwheel, and come along," Jack Forster cried crossly, and took him resolutely by the arm.

"Well, good-night, and many thanks," Captain Stuart said, as he shook hands. "In a day or two you will probably know—whatever there is to know—and—I don't think you'll be sorry you came."

He turned to de Grandcour as Miltimber and Jack Forster left the room.

"You have something to say to me?" he asked.

De Grandcour knocked the ash from his cigar.

"My friend, this is grave," he said.

"I am quite aware of it," Dick answered shortly.

De Grandcour, however, took no note of his tone.

"De Courchamps has been watching his chance to fall foul of you for some time," he continued. "I thought his idea was to force you into a duel, but he is aware that a duel with an Englishman is a ticklish thing. I have known him for many years—I do not like him; and you,

mon ami, I do like." He held out his hand as he spoke.

Dick took it absently.

"Thank you, monsieur, you are very good," he said vaguely. But one thought, one question filled his mind. What were the words upon that card? It would be to-morrow surely?

"What do you propose to do?" de Grandcour asked.

"To do?" he echoed.

"Yes," said the Frenchman, and by a gesture he asked permission to light a cigarette. It was obvious that he was prepared to listen. Dick, however, was not prepared to talk. He moved about the room uneasily.

"I don't know—nothing—at least, in a day or two—" the hurried, uncertain words broke off short. "Look here, de Grandcour," he said, and he stood in front of his guest and met his eyes squarely, "to be quite frank with you, I don't want to talk about it. I expect to clear it all up: I can say as much as that, but I can't say anything more—now."

De Grandcour bowed.

"*Bien,*" he said smoothly. "But should you want any assistance— It would perhaps be well for me to mention a little something that I saw to-night. When I reached the door I found that I had dropped my handkerchief; I therefore returned to seek it. As I pulled back the portière I saw de Courchamps still standing at the card-table, looking at Mme. Dubosc, who——"

Dick interrupted him.

"Pardon me, monsieur, but I must beg you not to mention madame's name in this matter," he said stiffly.

Again de Grandcour bowed: again he acquiesced. "*Bien, mon ami;* but you will remember that should you want me I am at your service always. Meanwhile, I say good-night." He rose from his chair as he spoke.

"Good-night, monsieur, and thank you," Dick answered heartily, as he held open the door for his guest to pass out. The man was going. At last he would be able to read her message: he would know what time—the thought froze unfinished in his mind; there in the passage, advancing towards him, were two well-known figures, guests that could not

be denied, the Duc d'Othmar and Sir Charles Davenant. Below his breath Dick swore fervently.

"May we come in, *mon cher?*" d'Othmar asked, and he entered the room as he spoke. Sir Charles followed him, and walking over to the mantelpiece, turned his back upon the other and looked down into the empty grate. D'Othmar seated himself by the table and stretched out his hand to a box of cigars that lay thereon. "May one smoke?" he queried. Dick pushed the box towards him. Did they mean to spend the night in his rooms? he wondered; judging by the leisurely manner in which d'Othmar lighted his cigar it appeared probable.

"This is rather a late visit, dear boy," he said smoothly; "we should have followed you immediately, but as young Forster announced that he was coming, and as our friend Sir Charles was somewhat excited, I thought it best first to go to my rooms for a little quiet, tranquillising smoke, during which you would get rid of your excellent but impetuous young friend. You are a strange people, you English. So much *verve*

concealed beneath your—may I say stolidity?"

"Say what you please, monsieur, I don't mind," Dick answered indifferently. It was sure to be to-morrow, he thought. He ought to wire again to Versailles, he— An irritable voice broke in upon his thoughts.

"Then you ought to mind," said Sir Charles, and he turned sharply from the mantelpiece. "Indifference is the foster-mother of vice."

"My dear Sir Charles!" d'Othmar interpolated, but his deprecation was unheeded: Sir Charles's silence was broken.

"Now look here, Dick," he continued resolutely, "I don't often say what I think, I consider it a clumsy habit—but I can't help telling you that you're an infernal fool."

"I quite agree with you," Dick answered quietly.

Sir Charles turned upon his heel with an impatient exclamation. He wanted argument, not acquiescence; he believed that he could cope with the first, he knew himself helpless before the second.

D'Othmar removed his cigar from his lips.

"It's not worth it, Dick," he said slowly. "As I remarked to you earlier this evening, if you want to go down-hill, take a woman for your guide. She'll make the pace for you. Still, you need not let her turn it into a *glissade*, you know."

"What do you mean?" Dick demanded hoarsely.

"I mean," d'Othmar answered gravely, "that for some reason of your own you have allowed an infamous charge to be made against you by a man whom it would, under any ordinary circumstances, give you the greatest possible pleasure to kick. Now it seems, if I may be permitted to quote Sir Charles, that you must have some very strong reason for making such an infernal fool of yourself as that. Some one has forced the pace, and that the some one is a woman goes without saying. The whole affair was obviously *une*—what you call a 'plant.' That is the word, is it not, Sir Charles? We have all noticed that de Courchamps wished to force a quarrel upon you, and curious

things have ere now happened in the Maison Dubosc." He paused and knocked the ash from his cigar. "The point I do not understand," he added, and his voice was slow and thoughtful, "is how de Courchamps prevailed upon madame to play into his hands."

Dick's face grew white and hard as he rose from his chair.

"Pardon me, but you are entirely wrong," he said with curt decision, "and I must request you not to bring madame's name into this matter. It is not at this moment in my power to explain anything, but you have done me the honour of coming here to-night, and if you will so far extend your trust, I hope in a few days at most, you will know that it was not misplaced."

"And meanwhile your name will be blackened in every club in Europe," Sir Charles cried irascibly. "De Courchamps knows how to spread reports!"

"Let him," Dick answered doggedly.

D'Othmar laid his hand upon his sleeve.

"My dear Dick, think a moment," he said persuasively. "These things are unpleasant, offensive. Every scandal has two sides, often

more, and one cannot choose which will come uppermost." His eyes were fixed intently upon Dick's face, and a caustic tone touched his voice as he continued: "Now, pardon me for reminding you—it is probably quite unnecessary—that the beautiful lady, whom we are not to mention, and the character of her husband are well known. De Courchamps also has more than once, what you call 'sailed in the wind.' It is at least probable that others besides myself will fall into the—error, I think you called it?—of saying '*Cherchez la femme.*' You are young, *mon cher*, I, alas, am so no longer. Paris is my world, while you are comparatively a stranger to her. I know that advice is always unpalatable, but like most unpleasant things, it has its uses. Let me help you. I think you can trust me to respect a secret."

He held out his hand: Dick wrung it warmly.

"Trust you," he repeated; his voice failed him, and he turned away.

D'Othmar's eyes followed him regretfully; he had understood that he would be told nothing. He turned back to the table and

mixed himself some whisky and water, humming softly to himself, "*Loyal je serai durant ma vie.*"

Sir Charles's comprehension was, however, neither so complete nor yet so sympathetic. He turned round angrily.

"Utter nonsense," he cried angrily. "It's all very well to play the fool with a couple of old friends who would go bail for you blindfold, but it won't work. The world's not peopled with friends, though it may be with acquaintances who usurp the name; that sort never stops to ask if a man has done a thing, but only if the world says he has, and as the world loves a scandal it will say anything."

"Then let it, who cares?" Dick retorted.

The response came as swiftly as the retort.

"I do," Sir Charles said. "We all do. You're mad, Dick. Recollect, it isn't only yourself; it's your people, and the regiment and—and all of us. You should think of that."

"I have thought of it," he replied, and his tone was low and resolute.

"Then you have not thought of it in the right way," Sir Charles retorted. "You—you're so confoundedly selfish. Now just let me put the matter before you in a proper light. You must see——"

D'Othmar interrupted him. "My dear Sir Charles," he said softly, "it is past two o'clock, and at such an hour it is not possible to look at anything in a proper light—not even a beautiful woman. Our eyes ache, and the illumination is artificial. Let us say good-night, and to-morrow doubtless we shall all see clearer. *La nuit porte conseil.*"

"Hum, I hope to heaven *something* will bring counsel," Sir Charles exclaimed. "A hot-headed, obstinate young fool!"

D'Othmar took his arm.

"And two interfering old men," he added. "Come, Sir Charles, we were young ourselves once, though it does seem so confoundedly long ago." He sighed as he spoke.

"Oh, come now, d'Othmar," Sir Charles cried in expostulation, but the duke cut him short.

"Memories are milestones of the past,"

he said. "They may be pleasant—beautiful—but they mark the years." He sighed again, and turning to Captain Stuart he held out his hand. "Good-night, Dick," he said, "I am at your service always. Count upon me. Good-night."

"Good-night, monsieur, and thank you. Good-night, Sir Charles. I'm sorry if I've been rude: I'm a bit put out, you see; but in a day or two you will know all about it, and I think you will see that I could not help myself."

Sir Charles grasped his hand warmly.

"Well, good-night, my boy. Perhaps I went too far; but, you know, one can't see the son of an old friend make a—" He broke off as he felt the light touch of d'Othmar's fingers upon his arm. "Oh, well, I won't say any more about it. Good-night, Dick. You're a damned idiot, but I can't help liking you." He followed d'Othmar from the room, the door closed; and, as the latch slipped into its socket, Dick snatched at the handkerchief within his cuff: it caught upon a sleeve-link. With a savage exclamation he tore it away, and so roughly did he rend the delicate cam-

bric, that the card fell fluttering from between its folds and lay face downwards on the table. He snatched it up. Three words were faintly, yet clearly, pencilled on the margin. The unshaded electric light fell full upon them, yet it seemed Dick could not read the written words. Grasping the card roughly, he held it close to the lamp upon the table. With cruel clearness its light shone down upon the card; shone, too, upon Dick's face. There was no mistake; no light could show her message to him other than it was; no darkness hide it from him now: the words had burnt into his brain. The despair in his eyes intensified, condensed, and a deadly greyness crept through the sunburn of his skin, as it creeps through molten metal at white heat. For a moment he stood there, silent, motionless; then, with a burst of bitter laughter, he flung the pasteboard from him and shouted aloud the message that it bore. "I cannot come! I cannot come!" he cried, and again that mirthless laughter rang through the room. "My God! and I've damned myself for *that!*" He struck out blindly with his closed fist, and the glasses on the table jarred and jangled in

a hideous discord. A tumbler fell harmlessly upon the velvet cloth. Dick snatched at it, and seizing one of the decanters that stood upon the tray, half filled the glass with brandy and swallowed the spirit at one gulp.

"Bowled out for life," he muttered. "I can never clear myself now. D'Othmar was right—'the slowest, surest, and most irretrievable.'" With a groan he flung himself into a chair, and throwing his arms out on the table let his head fall upon them. The clock on the mantelpiece ticked on, loudly, insistently, marking the seconds as they slipped from dark to dawn. A grey light stole through the curtained windows, creeping cautiously from behind their folds, making the electric light look garish and aggressive as it fell athwart the softer tints of dawn. Faint sounds were heard in the corridors and on the staircase of the hotel. Outside, the world was taking up its work: moment by moment the sound of traffic grew louder, more insistent—yet Dick Stuart paid no heed.

Suddenly a piercing shaft of sunshine fell across his table. With a brusque movement

he rose and shook himself, as a dog does when emerging from a cold plunge. His eyes fell upon the card: in another instant he had torn it into fragments and had ground them beneath his heel.

"And I loved her," he said hoarsely. "God, how I loved her!"

CHAPTER XI

THE DUCHESS'S DECISION

THE Duchess of Deerham was exceedingly English in her habits; she strongly objected to breakfasting in her bedroom, and she put no faith in rolls and butter as the foundation for a day's work. Moreover, on the morning following her arrival in Paris, it appeared to her that her luncheon hour might be uncertain; wherefore, when shortly after ten o'clock she seated herself at the little breakfast-table set forth in her sitting-room, she paid marked attention to her *omelette aux rognons* and took a second cup of coffee. Then she rang the bell and sent for her maid, who speedily appeared, a little fur coat upon her arm.

The duchess looked at it reflectively; then she glanced out of the window.

"Yes," she said, "I suppose it is cold because the sun is shining; it's a way it has in

Paris. Everything here is paradoxical," and she turned to let her maid assist her into the coat. Her toque she had put on before breakfast. She was a woman of observation, and had perceived upon her arrival the previous evening that there was no mirror in her sitting-room.

"That will do, Ernestine. Tell them to call a cab for me," she said.

Ernestine left the room and the duchess once more looked out of the window.

"Will she be glad?" she asked herself, "or have I left it until too late?"

"*La voiture est là, Mme. le Duchesse,*" a waiter announced, and she followed him down the stairs and entered the little carriage.

"*Avenue Champs Elysées, 900 bis,*" she said. The driver raised his whip; the duchess leant back in her seat.

"*Chère madame!* out so early," said a thin, high-toned voice. The coachman lowered his whip, and the duchess leant forward and lowered the window. D'Othmar and Sir Charles Davenant were standing at the carriage doors.

"What brings you here?" asked the duchess.

"I regret to say, business," d'Othmar answered. "I wish it were pleasure," and he sighed.

The duchess darted a quick look at him; then she glanced at Sir Charles: she observed that he was forgetting to look young, and her face grew anxious. "You have something to tell me," she said.

"Something that we *must* tell you, I fear," d'Othmar responded. Sir Charles still held his peace.

"Then drive with me to the Bois," the duchess said with decision, and she motioned to d'Othmar to open the carriage door. "We will get out and walk and then you shall tell me. Walking is a good accompaniment to talking. My brain works better when my muscles are moving." She turned to Sir Charles. "You must take another cab and follow us," she said. He bowed and turned silently away. He had nothing to say, except upon one subject, and that could not be talked of at the door of a hotel.

. . . . . .

It was, as the duchess had surmised, an extremely cold morning, and it was not difficult

to find an unfrequented path under the bare trees of the Bois. Each twig and tendril stood out with the soft delicacy of feathers against the brilliant blue of the sky, and here and there patches of hoarfrost gleamed dazzlingly bright in the sunbeams. The frost had entered well into the ground, which rang metallically beneath the feet of the duchess and her companions, when, upon leaving their cabs, they turned into a side path and walked briskly away from the road. All three were silent. Suddenly the duchess spoke.

"Tell me," she said, "as quickly and as clearly as you can."

D'Othmar turned to Sir Charles; but the little man shook his head.

"I cannot," he said, and his voice was hoarse and muffled. "It—it's not a kind of thing I've any words for."

The duchess's eyes softened as they rested on the anxious face, the puckered brow. She laid her hand upon his arm.

"Words are not everything," she murmured. His mouth twitched sharply, and she turned to d'Othmar. "You tell me," she said.

The Frenchman bowed. "It is, as Sir

Charles says, no easy tale to tell," he answered, "but if I word it ill, you will forgive me."

Up and down, up and down the path they walked, the thin, well-bred tones ringing clearly through the frosty air, albeit d'Othmar's tone was low; yet no ears save those for which they were intended caught his words, for on either side the frosted grass cut them off from the world of Paris as if it were some frozen sea.

At last the tale was ended and a silence fell between the three.

Then abruptly the duchess turned towards her companions.

"I shall see Dick first," she said.

D'Othmar bowed.

Sir Charles grunted. "Then I hope you will get something out of him," he said gruffly.

"Yes; hope," said the duchess, "it's a good word—and a better feeling. Now call me a cab."

As he closed the door of the little *fiacre*, Sir Charles turned to d'Othmar. "What's the good of hoping about an obstinate fellow like that?" he asked. "Why, he would not listen to a single word you and I said."

D'Othmar smiled.

"But the duchess is a woman," he said quietly.

"I suppose she counts upon that fact," Sir Charles muttered. "She seems to expect a good deal, anyway."

"Yes," said d'Othmar, and his voice was slow and thoughtful, "and she is one of the women that men do not disappoint."

CHAPTER XII

QUESTIONS

THE Duchess of Deerham had spoken of hope as she left d'Othmar and Sir Charles Davenant at the Bois, but to Dick Stuart, as he stood by the fireplace in his sitting-room at the Hotel Bristol, his back turned to the untasted breakfast set forth upon his table, it seemed that the future held nothing but despair. What else, indeed, can it hold for the man outcast from his kind? He can but sink to the level of the dumb animals that must henceforth be his dearest companions, since, as with them, action, appetite, will be the only functions life leaves him to fulfil.

As he stood there, Dick saw strange pictures of the future form themselves in the red ashes of the burning wood. He saw himself riding wildly, madly, over some desert sand, galloping recklessly on, not for dear life, but to

blot out the memory of how dear life once had been. To forget in sleep, drink, death, that must now be his only prayer. Yet could he pray? A light tapping at his door interrupted his thoughts. He paid no heed; it grew more insistent, but he would not answer it. As he and those amongst whom he had always lived, understood life, he was a dead man; why could they not leave him in peace? The dead always claimed peace. He would have that, at least.

The knocking, however, continued.

"Dick, Dick," a clear voice cried through the panels of the door, "are you dead or asleep?" He started violently.

"My God! the duchess," he exclaimed, and he looked frantically round the room, as if seeking some hiding-place; eyes follow thought more quickly than will can control it.

"I am coming in to see," the voice continued; and with a smothered groan, Dick fell back against the mantelpiece.

"Well, what's the matter with you?" said the duchess, as she held out her hand. "You don't seem pleased to see me."

Dick bowed; it appeared that he did not

see the outstretched hand. "I am exceedingly sorry, duchess," he responded stiffly, "but I am afraid——"

She interrupted him.

"It's no use, Dick. I am here, and I mean to stay," she said; and she sat down in a large arm-chair beside the fireplace.

"It's very good of you, duchess, but——"

"Oh, I know all about that 'but.' I have just seen d'Othmar and Sir Charles; they told me. That's the reason why I came."

"That is the reason why you came," he repeated dully, and he looked at her with blank, uncomprehending eyes.

"Yes, of course. Why, my dear Dick, I have known you ever since you were in Eton jackets, so how can you expect me to let you make an egregious fool of yourself?"

He turned away from her. "I don't think you understand," he said. "You must forgive me if I say that it is a matter of which no woman can possibly judge."

"Because the situation was created by a woman?" she asked. Dick turned round sharply.

"I do not understand you," he said coldly.

"Oh, yes, you do, Dick. So don't try to talk like a book. You don't do it at all well, and heroics are not called for."

"I am sorry to be so stupid," he said stiffly.

"Oh, don't apologise. The social code prescribed that a man—the sort of man one knows, at least—never knows anything about the woman who spoils his life for him; or whose life he spoils; it doesn't much matter which."

"Really, duchess—" Dick began perturbedly, but he broke off short and walked up and down the room uneasily.

"Well, really what?" she queried.

Dick checked his restless pacing to and fro abruptly.

"I have known you all my life," he said. "Ever since I can remember you have been the best and dearest friend boy and man ever had; but you must not make surmises. You must not, really."

"I don't; I state facts. You are in love with that poor, pretty little Alice. Now don't interrupt. I am quite used to seeing my friends in love with their neighbours' wives,

and Dubosc, thank heaven, isn't your neighbour, or mine either. In ordinary cases I look the other way. In this case I can't. It's only a detail, but Alice is my godchild. Oh, don't look so surprised. I haven't time to explain; it's a mere matter of feeling, and feelings can wait; facts won't, so we must get at the logic of them."

"And if I altogether deny your premises?" he said.

"You will perjure yourself badly, and waste your time and my own. My dear Dick, we have known each other all our lives, and as I have already said, I am not going to let you make a fool of yourself."

"Too late, duchess," he answered grimly. "It's done."

"Well, Sir Charles told me you had done your best; he wanted to explain how, but I would not let him, because I was sure he did not know."

Dick stared at her. "Well, it's pretty thorough," he said bitterly. "So thorough that I am afraid I must ask you to go, duchess. It—it won't be possible for you and the duke to know me after to-day." He moved

to open the door for her, but she laid her hand upon his arm.

"Rubbish!" she said.

Then all his hardly won self-control left him.

"Great heaven!" he cried, "do you think I would say it if it were anything but bitter earnest? I—I deceived d'Othmar and Sir Charles last night, but—but, I can't keep it up." He leant his arms upon the mantelpiece and buried his head in them. Her eyes hurt him.

The duchess got up from her chair and went over to him; he started as he felt her hand upon his shoulder.

"My dear Dick," she said quietly, "playing the blackguard unmasked is not in your line. You do it uncommonly badly."

He lifted his head quickly. "What do mean?" he demanded.

The duchess smiled.

"Merely that your elephantine efforts to make me believe that you keep cards up your sleeve in order to win a few paltry pounds are simply wasted." She paused, but he did not speak; he was looking at her in amazement.

"It is possible," she continued, and she watched his face narrowly as she spoke, "to have other things up one's sleeve besides cards. A note, for instance, a woman's note, or—perhaps after all, a card: some silly odd card; women are fools enough for anything, even old ones, and she's a baby. Ah—" A china vase fell clattering into the grate, where it lay shivered to fragments. She caught the lappets of his coat between her fingers; her eyes were close to his.

"It was a card," she cried. "She wrote upon a card. Little fool, I knew it!"

He unloosed her grasp and turned away.

"Surmises again," he said, "and, after the fashion of surmises, false."

A curious expression crossed her face.

"I suppose you are bound to do it," she said slowly.

"Bound to do what?" he asked wonderingly.

"Lie," the duchess responded pithily.

Dick strangled an exclamation in his throat.

"The question is," the duchess went on reflectively, "what did she write?" She looked

at him critically. "You are obviously ready to cut your throat," she said, "*ergo*, she is not going to run away with you. Dick—" she made a step towards him as she spoke, "she has thrown you over."

After all courtesy and self-control are the outside of things. She had touched the inner man; it responded to the touch.

Dick swore, low, but emphatically; then he apologised half-heartedly. The duchess paid no attention to his apology, but she apparently regarded the exclamation as an answer.

"Ah! then she *has* thrown you over," she said slowly, "and you can therefore never show that card; because by doing so you would compromise her for nothing—from what you suppose to be her point of view, that is. However, it does not matter. I don't want the card; I can arrange it without that." She resumed her seat as she spoke; it occurred to her that she had been standing for some time, and she knew that later in the day she would require all her strength.

Captain Stuart gazed at her in amazement.

"Are—are you mad, duchess?" he asked.

"Not in the least; although no doubt I must seem so to you," she answered placidly. "That, however, is a detail; the point is," and her voice weighed upon the words, "that M. de Courchamps must withdraw his accusation and make you an ample apology."

Dick laughed aloud.

"De Courchamps withdraw—apologise!" he cried, "when he was absolutely in the right as to the card being in my cuff, and——"

"Ah, I knew it was a card," the duchess interpolated.

"Of course it was a card," he said hurriedly. "Sir Charles told you that. Every one heard the accusation."

"Quite so; but every one, my dear Dick, did not hear you acknowledge that it was in your cuff. On the contrary, Sir Charles appeared eager to choke any one who should say so; and even to choke you for not saying it was not there. I wonder if he would want to choke me? However, that doesn't matter. The card is a detail; it will disappear."

"A detail—disappear," Dick echoed.

The duchess waved her hand as one who indicates many things.

"Of course I mean figuratively speaking," she explained. "I suppose the card itself is burnt; if not it should be. I do not propose to show it to de Courchamps. I have something else to show him; and I think that this something will interest him even more than that card."

"You—you don't expect me to understand you, I suppose?" Dick said; his eyes were fixed upon her face, but he found no reading of the riddle writ thereon.

"Of course not," she answered with decision. "That is quite unnecessary. You see, I propose to work a miracle for you, and no one understands miracles."

"It needs a miracle to change the situation," Dick commented, and his tone was grim.

"Exactly; or I should not suggest their employment. Miracles must never be called upon needlessly. When I see Count René de Courchamps——"

"When you see him!" Dick cried.

"Yes; I shall have to see him. I used to know him years ago. I have sent for him, and —I think that he will come."

"But I don't see——"

"My dear boy, I don't expect it," she interrupted. "The belief that is born of sight is a very spurious variety; true faith is the power of believing things on insufficient evidence. In old days you would take my word for anything. Do you remember how, when I was first married—you were about nine years old then—I promised to take you somewhere and something made me late. They told you I had forgotten, but you said, 'My duchess never forgets, and she promised'? I came, Dick."

"I know you did," he cried. "You were always my ideal!"

"Ah, I wish I were so still; I'm such a safe object of worship. That's the reason why you won't believe in me," she answered drily.

"But I *do* believe in you, heart and soul."

"That's a good boy," she commented approvingly. "Come and see me at a quarter past seven this evening, and by that time I hope to be able to tell you—all you need know." She rose as she spoke.

"It was awfully good of you to come,

duchess," he said warmly. "I can't thank you, but——"

"Oh, I don't want thanks; I want payment. You must understand that. If I succeed in saving your honour and Alice's good name now, it's not in order that you may smirch both afterwards. You must give her up."

"How can one give up what one has never had?" he asked bitterly.

The duchess smothered a sigh of relief.

"Don't you think," she said slowly, and she watched his face narrowly as she spoke, "that when once your name is cleared, it would be an excellent thing for you to leave Europe?"

"When my name is cleared," he repeated. "You are very sure."

"So are you," she responded promptly. "You said you would take my word for it. Now, if I get you a good appointment, will you go?"

He moved restlessly about the room. "If I thought she cared—" he said half to himself, but the duchess cut him short.

"Don't be absurd. What's the good of

thinking things!" she cried. Dick's nerves were ajar.

"Good heavens, duchess, you don't know! How could you know?" he exclaimed irritably.

"Very easily," she answered quietly. "I'm not a child; I'm a woman, and I have seen lots of men in love. Some with me; some, of course, with other women."

He turned away impatiently. "You don't even take me seriously," he said vexedly.

"Oh, yes I do; and your seriousness is wearing me out. There is not a shred of reason in it; if there were you would agree with me. Why, good heavens, Dick, it is hard enough for two people to get on together for years and years, when they have got all their friends, and enemies, to help them, but when both friends and enemies drop them, heaven help the poor souls—the world won't." She resumed her seat; seriousness, as she had said, is fatiguing.

"I must see her again," he answered doggedly.

With the duchess's visit all things had taken on a different aspect; his love was no

longer in the past tense. She laid her hand upon his arm.

"Dick," she said gravely, "I told you that the fact of Mme. Dubosc's being my godchild was a detail. It's not. I made myself surety for her and—well, I have failed her once, but, please God, I will never fail her again. M. Dubosc came to see me just now; I think he will let her go with me to England. Now will you go?"

"I must see her again," he repeated.

The duchess leant back in her chair.

"Ah, the logic of Eden still prevails," she said. "Alice is to decide for you, and you hope to decide Alice, while generously letting her feel that the responsibility for two ruined lives is hers."

"Why should they be ruined? I would make her happy," he cried.

"By pleasing yourself," said the duchess. "It's a common method; but if she asks you to go, will you?"

Again Dick strode restlessly up and down the room; her eyes followed him. At last he stopped in front of her chair.

"Yes," he said hoarsely.

The duchess rose and held out her hand.

"I always liked you, Dick. *Au revoir,*" she said, and left the room.

The word that Captain Stuart muttered as he closed the door behind her was no French *politesse:* it was English, and in four letters.

The duchess meanwhile descended the staircase, and ordering a *fiacre,* repeated her order of the morning, "*Avenue Champs Elysées, 900 bis,*" she said.

CHAPTER XIII

FROM DREAMING TO WAKING

SLOWLY, painfully, Alice Dubosc raised her aching eyelids, and her dull eyes stared unseeingly at the familiar walls of her bedroom. The dim light of a shaded night-lamp lent strange shapes and semblances to the objects in the room: the soft, pink roses of the wall-paper appeared to open and expand until they seemed rather sea-anemones stretching their greedy tentacles threateningly towards the conventional blue ribbons that crept about their stalks, than harmless flowers upon a papered wall. Even the delicate ribbon twisted, turned, and took strange, snake-like shapes, as Alice's dully observant eyes watched with the unconscious interest of a half-awakened mind. It seemed to her that betwixt the sea-anemones and snakes some war was imminent. Would it

be a war *à l'outrance?* and who would win? Her tired eyes followed the pink and blue outlines upon their groundwork of pure white, while these questions flitted idly through her mind. The pinks were bigger, stronger, than the blues; yet the sinuous activity of the latter looked dangerous. As Alice watched, a dainty strip of blue wound itself, with diabolical cunning, so insidiously and closely about the stalk of one of the largest, softest, pinkest sea-anemones, that struggle as it would, the great round thing could not tear itself away from the little wisp of azure, whose hold was so tenacious and so sure. It seemed to Alice that the struggles of the sea-anemone but gave fresh openings to its subtle foe, and that did one pink contour escape the embrace of the frail ribbon, that was yet so firm, two more were caught and tightened in another loop of blue. Ah! now the loops leant towards each other; they met, crossed, tied, knotted—how small a knot, yet how secure! Who could unloose the loops so tightly tied? She raised herself upon one elbow to see if any of the other sea-anemones would come to their comrade's

aid. As she did so a swift dancing shadow leapt between her and the combatants, and when it passed the foes had disappeared. She was staring at the flowers of the wall-paper in her own bedroom. How had she come there? What had happened? She pressed her hot hands over her straining eyes, she wanted to think: she *must* think: there was something she should remember. What was it? Suddenly a shaft of recollection shot through her brain. Whatever it was, it had something to do with Dick Stuart. Her arms fell with an impetuous movement to her sides, and she sprang into a sitting posture. As she did so, a firm, thin hand was laid upon her arm, and a firm, thin voice said in cold, colourless accents: "Madame must lie still. Madame must sleep."

With a start, half fear, half anger, Alice turned towards the speaker.

"You here, Josephine!" she said. "Why are you not in bed?"

"Monsieur desired that I should watch beside madame," the woman answered.

"Watch by me!" Alice cried. "Why, I am not ill! I—" She stopped and a great

horror crept slowly into her eyes. Memory was wakening. Quite still she sat, in the rigid, upright position she had assumed, staring straight in front of her; but now she saw neither sea-anemones nor serpents, pinks nor blues. Her own room had faded away: instead of it she saw a brilliantly lighted salon, a group of men, one of them with a set, white face, standing beside a cloth-covered table upon which, softly, silently, relentlessly, fell, one by one, a pack of cards. With a scream of recollection she sprang from the bed; but once more that thin, firm hand closed upon her arm, and the dull, expressionless voice said slowly:

"Madame must lie down. Madame must rest."

"I will not," Alice cried. "I must dress. I must see monsieur—must tell him—tell them all——"

"Monsieur is sleeping; madame would not disturb him," the maid interposed in flat, persistent tones.

"Not disturb him? You don't know what you are saying, Josephine. You——"

"I have monsieur's orders, madame."

A strange look of mingled fear and anger —the fear and anger of a helpless comprehension—woke in Alice's eyes, darkening their azure till they glowed blackly as do great sapphires in an artificial light.

"You mean that I am a prisoner," she cried, and with a swift, sudden movement she flung off the chilly fingers whose hold was still upon her arm, and darting over to the door tried to turn the handle. No bolt was in the socket, no key within the lock, yet it was fast secured, locked from the outside. The maid watched her, impassive, indifferent.

Alice turned and faced her, defiance in her eyes; but Josephine neither moved nor spoke. Then, as she noted the quiet security of her demeanour, Alice realised how little she had to hope, how much to fear. The defiance died out of her eyes, killed by the dumb misery that flooded them. With an imploring gesture she ran to Josephine and flung herself upon her knees before her. "Let me out, let me out!" she cried. "For God's sake undo the door and let me go!" The shadow of a smile crossed the maid's thin, pale lips. Alice sprang to her feet.

"I will repay you! I will give you anything, everything. See," and she rushed over to her dressing-table, "there are my diamonds. I—" She stopped, and again her eyes darkened and widened in a great dismay. The smile upon the maid's lips was no longer a shadow, but a living thing that lent a cruel curve to the cold lips as they parted in sardonic amusement.

Feverishly Alice tossed over the gloves, fan, handkerchiefs, upon her table; threw open boxes, pulled out drawers: no jewels gleamed amongst the litter of the disordered toilet appurtenances; drawers and boxes were empty, one and all. Her hands fell to her sides. "He has taken them," she said.

The maid's eyes were bent upon her folded hands: she smiled no longer.

"It is monsieur's habit to keep the jewels of madame," she said.

"But to-night, when I was ill—to take them then!" Alice cried.

"Doubtless monsieur was much distressed," the maid said gravely, "but madame knows that nothing disturbs the habits of monsieur."

Alice shuddered.

"Nothing disturbs his habits," she repeated slowly; her eyes dilated and her face grew yet more deadly white: then with a beseeching cry she once more stretched her hands towards the maid.

"Help me! For God's sake, help me!" she cried. "I have never done you any harm—I don't think I have ever done anybody any harm. Won't you help me? Oh, have a little pity! Perhaps some day you will want some one to have pity upon you, to help you; and then, if you don't help me now, you will be sorry and— Ah! if you have ever loved anybody in all the world, for the sake of the one you loved, help me now! People who love can always pity."

"Can they?" the maid said, and a curious question rose within her sombre eyes.

"Oh, yes, yes! You know that, if you have ever loved, and you must, you have!" Alice cried, and her eyes searched the dark face passionately. It was impassive still, and the lowered eyelids hid the look that memory had sent to the gloomy eyes. There was a moment's pause. Then the maid looked up.

"Listen, madame," she said. "I know monsieur well. If I let you go to him to-night you will ruin yourself and me. Lie down. Try to sleep—oh, don't shake your head," and a note of impatience rang through the quiet voice. "If you want to be any good in the world you must learn to sleep at will. Sleep gives strength, and you will want it all in the morning; for *then* you shall see monsieur. So much I will promise you—since you have asked it for the sake of some one I have loved."

"God bless you!" Alice cried, and she seized the maid's gaunt hand and covered it with kisses.

Once more Josephine smiled; but the curves of her lips were no longer cruel: a gentle pity softened them and her smile was as the smile of one who meets a wayfarer seeking the gates of hell, and is constrained to point the way.

CHAPTER XIV

THE DUCHESS'S SECRET

THERE was an expression of annoyance upon the face of Count René de Courchamps as he stood in the centre of the luxuriously appointed salon of his apartment in the Place Vendôme, an open letter in his hand. It had led his thoughts some ten years back, yet, as these thoughts grew clearer and more definite, no look of youth came into face and eyes, but rather one of age, of weakness.

He ground the note within the palm of his hand. "She can know nothing," he muttered, "nothing." He ceased to grind the little sheet of note-paper within his palm; swiftly, carefully, his filbert fingers smoothed it out, and laid it upon the table before him.

It was only a little sheet of dull, blue paper, surmounted by a tiny coronet of strawberry leaves, and it contained but five formal lines.

"The Duchess of Deerham," it said, "presents her compliments to M. le Comte René de Courchamps, and will be glad to see him this afternoon at four o'clock. The duchess trusts that he will find it convenient to call at the hour named, as the matter she has to communicate will vitally affect his future."

With a brusque movement of anger he thrust the note away from him.

"What the devil does she mean by writing to me like this," he cried. "In the third person, too; to me, Count René de Courchamps, nephew and heir of the Marquis de St. Ouen and formerly first secretary to her own brother-in-law in Rome! She knew me well enough then. *Mon Dieu!* did she know me too well? Her cleverness was always infernal. How I hate her! Could—but no; it is impossible—*utterly* impossible." Once more he took up the letter; once more he read it through. "It was always like her to treat one like a lackey," he exclaimed, "it means nothing—nothing at all. I shall not go."

He flung the letter in the fire and lighting a cigarette threw himself into an arm-chair

and took up a paper. At the moment the uncertain attitude of the Government upon a question of foreign policy was agitating the public mind, and the paper contained a very strong article upon the subject. It seemed, however, that de Courchamps had but little inclination for reading; he turned from page to page impatiently, glancing down the columns with a roving eye that read no word of the closely printed phrases.

Suddenly he looked up: a large Empire clock stood upon the mantelpiece directly facing him; its hands pointed to five minutes to four. René de Courchamps sprang to his feet, and seizing his hat and coat which lay on a chair beside the door, he quickly descended the staircase, and crossing the square, disappeared through the gateway of the Hôtel Bristol.

The duchess's note was answered.

. . . . . .

"I will tell Mme. la Duchesse that monsieur awaits her," said the waiter, bowing, as he showed de Courchamps into her sitting-room. The bright, yet cold, rays of the afternoon sun made a broad pathway on the car-

pet; everything in the room seemed strangely distinct. De Courchamps observed that the muslin curtains which should have fallen across the windows had been pulled back. It seemed to him that the world was full of light; outside in the street the very dust danced in its beams, and within the room each flower and leaf of carpet or of wall hanging stood out from their background with the clearness of a carving. "Crude and hard like herself," he muttered. "She must make even a Hotel Salon into her own image. What possessed me to come? and why, in Heaven's name, did I come at the hour she gave? Her idea of punctuality was always that the rest of the world should wait for her. She—" The door opened and the Duchess of Deerham came slowly into the room.

De Courchamps stepped forward to meet her, but she acknowledged his presence only by a slight and very formal inclination of her head. Silently she seated herself upon the sofa, but to him she made no offer of a chair. He twirled his hat uneasily in his hands.

"Mme. la Duchesse was good enough to send for me," he said, and his brow contracted

angrily as he heard the nervous note in his voice. Once more she made that little formal inclination of her head.

"Yes, I sent for you," she said drily. "It was necessary that I should see you; otherwise, as you doubtless understand, you would not be here." De Courchamps's face grew livid with rage; it seemed for an instant that it must master him, but by a desperate effort he controlled himself, and bowing with exaggerated politeness he said smoothly:

"I regret, madame——"

The duchess interrupted him.

"Do not regret, monsieur; repent if you will, regret is a phrase."

De Courchamps started. "Of what am I to repent, madame?" he queried.

The duchess leant back in her chair.

"Ah, that is a long story, and I sent for you in order that I might relate it!" she said slowly, and her eyes were fixed upon his face as she spoke. "It is dated some ten years back," she continued. "Possibly you would like to sit, monsieur, while I tell it to you." She made a gesture towards a chair. De Courchamps took it unwillingly; the look that had

come upon his face as he had read her note was there again, and deeper, stronger, than before.

The chair that she had indicated faced the window, but by sitting sideways, leaning one arm upon the table, his profile only would be towards her, he reflected. A paper-knife was lying upon an open book beside his hand; he took it up and toyed with it absently.

The duchess resumed the thread of her tale. "The scene of the little tragedy, for such it proved to the poor little heroine thereof, was laid in Rome, and it occurred during the time that my brother represented the French embassy there. You may perhaps remember that I spent that winter with my sister, while the duke was tiger-shooting in India. I had an Italian maid with me—a singularly beautiful girl, and a first-rate maid. To my great regret when I had been but five months in Rome, she told me she must leave. Why, she would not say, and as my questions were answered only by floods of tears, and I dislike tears, I let her go. She never applied to me for a character, but—I saw her again."

The paper-knife fell with a little soft thud upon the table-cloth.

"Pardon, madame!" de Courchamps cried apologetically.

She acknowledged the apology by a gesture. "I trust my story does not bore you, monsieur," she said.

"*Mais non, madame!* How is it possible? Everything that madame says is always of an interest——"

Again she cut him short. "I am glad you find it so," she said. "You may perhaps remember that during that month of March, ten years ago, there was much business at the embassy connected with a certain secret treaty—I need not enter into particulars—the only point of importance to my story is that, just before the treaty was to be signed, my brother-in-law received information that some of its details had penetrated beyond the walls of the embassy. He was further informed that a certain great financier confidently anticipated early intelligence of the completion of the treaty. Precautions were at once taken, and it was made impossible for such early information to be despatched—even had a secretary of embassy himself desired—" Her voice leant upon the words, and as she spoke them, the

fragile paper-knife snapped sharply between de Courchamps's fingers. He sprang to his feet.

"A thousand pardons, madame," he exclaimed in excited apology. "I am stupid, clumsy! Engrossed by your interesting story——"

"Do not apologise, monsieur," she said, and stretching out her hand she gathered up the fragments of ivory as she spoke.

"These are a tribute to my tale. Pray, sit down. So far you have but the prologue of my story."

With a reluctance which he tried in vain to conceal, de Courchamps resumed his seat. The duchess still held the pieces of ivory; she weighed them in her hand as she continued:

"It happened that the day my brother-in-law received the information I spoke of—the date, by the way, was the 27th of March—the month's warning which my maid had given me, expired, and she left the embassy telling no one whither she was bound. You will recollect the date, monsieur, for it was on that evening that you received a telegram desiring

your immediate presence here, in Paris, as it was believed that your uncle, the Marquis de St. Ouen, was dying. De Villemar made no difficulty as to sparing you; you left by the night mail and—never returned. The marquis recovered and desired to keep you with him. You were therefore—lost to diplomacy."

De Courchamps's lips and throat were dry and his voice rang harshly through the civil words that clothed it.

"Madame la Duchesse is too kind to remember the affairs of one so insignificant," he said, bowing.

"The significance of things, monsieur, depends upon their situation," she said, "and on the 27th of March, ten years ago, I found the situation distinctly interesting. Poor de Villemar merely found it embarrassing; he was a charming creature—*gentilhomme au bout des ongles;* but not clever. He never ascertained through whose agency the details to which I have referred left the embassy." She paused, her eyes fixed upon her guest; he leant back in his chair, and the tense muscles of his face relaxed slightly. The shadow of a smile

touched the corners of Helen Deerham's mouth. "I did not tell him," she said.

De Courchamps jumped up from his chair. "You, madame!" he cried. His voice shook and his face was livid.

"Yes," she answered quietly. "I could have done so had I chosen, since it was into my hands that the letter undertaking to send a certain telegram to—shall I give you the name? Alphonse——"

His agitation mastered him. "You had the letter. *You!*" he cried, and he dropped into his chair again as if he had no strength to stand.

"It was given to me by the person to whom the writer had entrusted it when he found himself unable to despatch further intelligence from the embassy," she continued. De Courchamps leant back heavily in his chair, and the sunshine showed two little beads of perspiration on his forehead. The duchess noted them, but neither face nor voice softened. Her task was not yet done. "The writer," she continued, "had enclosed directions that the letter should be posted immediately; the person to whom it was given, how-

ever, met with an accident before reaching her destination, and was carried to a hospital where she lay dangerously ill for some time. The packet, therefore, was not despatched."

For an instant de Courchamps raised his eyes and stared at her blankly; then the lids fell again.

"It was to my maid, Francesca, that the papers were entrusted," said the duchess.

De Courchamps straightened himself in his chair. "But what, madame, has your maid, Francesca, to do with me?" he asked.

"Ah, that is the end of the story!" she answered. "I fear I must tax your patience yet further."

"Madame is an admirable *raconteuse*," he replied.

She bent her head in acknowledgment. "Then I will continue," she said. "For some time Francesca was unconscious, then delirious; but as soon as full consciousness returned, she sent for the writer of that letter." De Courchamps started violently, but quickly recovering himself, he leant one elbow on the arm of his chair and resting his face on his hand partially screened it. "She found," the

duchess continued, "that he had left Rome. Then she sent for me. The papers were written in French and she wished me to translate them for her."

De Courchamps's hand fell from his face.

"They were private papers!" he cried.

"So Francesca believed. Her idea was that they might give her some hold over the writer; a hold she desired eagerly to obtain for the sake of her child. She believed that its father had deserted her."

De Courchamps's lips worked painfully, but at first no sound came from them. At length he said huskily:

"Really, duchess, your imagination is——"

Her clear, cold voice cut him short. "Quite unequal to the conception of so clever a despatch as that which my poor Francesca failed to forward," she said. "The amplest information was conveyed in the most concise manner imaginable. The suggestions as to the financial advantages likely to accrue to—shall we say the country of Alphonse? —showed complete mastery of the whole scheme."

De Courchamps sprang from his seat and confronted her; on his face was the look of an animal at bay.

"Where are the papers?" he demanded. The duchess looked up tranquilly; then she rose, and crossing over to the mantelpiece, she leant one arm upon it as she answered.

"The interesting question, monsieur, is not where they are, but where they will be," she said slowly.

"What do you mean?" he cried, and he came towards her.

"That I do not think the Marquis de St. Ouen will care to make the writer of that letter his heir," she answered.

De Courchamps fell back. "You—you mean to say that you have that letter," he stammered, "that you intend to show it to him?"

She bent her head in assent. "Unless a certain condition is complied with," she said.

Vainly de Courchamps tried to moisten his lips, to control his voice; it was hoarse with fear.

"What is your condition?" he asked.

Her eyes were on his face; her voice was

low and level. "My condition is twofold," she said, "it involves two letters. One of apology to Captain Stuart for the accusation brought against him last night, accompanied, of course, by a full retraction of the same; the other a letter addressed to the Duc d'Othmar. It will explain to him your error, express your regret, and entreat him to assist you in explaining matters to the world."

De Courchamps laughed shrilly.

"*Voilà le jeu!*" he cried.

"Do you think it one?" she asked.

He leant forward in his chair, and it was evident that he desired to speak calmly; his voice, however, was not wholly under his control. He did his best, however. "You are a woman of the world, madame," he said, "and you know that to extort conditions it is necessary to prove the power to do so. I have seen none of these papers of which you talk. When you show them to me, the time to talk of conditions will have come."

The duchess smiled.

"Possibly, monsieur, it might also have passed," she answered. "I am, as you say, a woman of the world, and I know that in time

of war no general places his ammunition within reach of the enemy."

De Courchamps sprang to his feet.

"Madame, you insult me!" he cried.

"Not at all," she answered airily, "we are only speaking in generalities."

He drew nearer to her. "You refuse to show me those papers?" he said.

Her eyes met his and he fell back a step.

"I do," she answered quietly. "If, however, you desire further proof of my possession of them, I will quote to you the terms of the telegram which you had arranged to send to—Alphonse—the moment the treaty was signed. In your letter to him you said: 'When you receive an unsigned telegram containing the two words, *Café complet*, you will know that the treaty is *un fait accompli*.'" She paused, and then added slowly: "It was an ingenious formula, monsieur, but I scarcely think that the Marquis de St. Ouen will find such '*café complet*' easy of digestion. He is of the old noblesse."

"You would not dare to tell him!" de Courchamps cried.

Once more her eyes met his.

"Have you ever known me afraid, monsieur?" she asked.

He turned away abruptly and paced up and down the room like a caged panther who seeks a way of escape. He checked his walk suddenly.

"If you had these papers why did you not show them to the ambassador?" he demanded.

"Ah, that is my regret!" she answered. "Had I done so it would not have been possible for my friends to meet you."

De Courchamps's thin lips narrowed to a scarcely perceptible line, but no word escaped the tightly locked teeth.

"Unfortunately," she continued, "when Francesca's child was born dead, and she herself lay dying, she implored me to do nothing to harm you, and, as I knew that diplomatic secrets would not henceforth come your way, I was weak enough to promise."

"And strong enough to break your promise," he said bitterly.

"Precisely," she answered.

De Courchamps turned to the window and looked out upon the Place Vendôme. All sorts and conditions of men jostled one

another as they crossed it, in their efforts to avoid being run over by the heedless drivers of carriages and cabs. That broken-down, out-at-elbows man seemed to value his life as keenly as did the extremely smart specimen of aristocracy with whom he had just collided; yet the one life held all that in René de Courchamps's estimation made it worth the having; he was rich and noble, the other poor and ignoble. That woman, in the room behind him, said she held it in her power to make him, René de Courchamps, sink to the level of that wretched man in threadbare coat and down-trodden shoes. And if she had that letter, the draft of that telegram, he knew that she spoke but the bare truth. His uncle would disown him; he would become a beggar and an outcast. Well enough he knew that it was St. Ouen's heir, not René de Courchamps, whom society received.

He faced about brusquely. "How do I know you really have those papers?" he said.

The duchess was standing by the mantelpiece, and he observed that she was looking at the clock. She turned to answer him.

"That letter, monsieur, was written on the

27th of March, ten years ago," she answered. "Have I quoted with inaccuracy?"

He smothered an oath as he threw himself into a chair; he must think. The duchess, however, considered it unnecessary; again she glanced at the clock.

"I suppose it will take me about half an hour to drive to the Hotel St. Ouen," she remarked reflectively, "half an hour to return —and the marquis may be agitated; it may not be possible for me to hurry away—and I expect friends to dinner. I fear I must order the carriage." She stretched out her hand towards the bell as she spoke.

De Courchamps darted forward. "What do you wish me to write?" he cried.

Her hand again fell to her side; she shrugged her shoulders carelessly.

"What you will," she said indifferently. "Perhaps that upon subsequent examination of the cards, it was found that two had adhered together."

"Impossible," he interrupted.

Once more the shapely shoulders moved disdainfully.

"Then that the pack was imperfect—the

missing card discovered by M. Dubosc in the drawer from which the pack was taken."

"And Dubosc?" he demanded.

"M. Dubosc will corroborate whatever explanation you elect to make."

De Courchamps sneered. "Ah, does M. Dubosc also confide his letters to a woman?" he asked ironically.

"That, monsieur, I would suggest your inquiring of himself," she answered coldly, and her eyes turned to the clock. "I am sorry to hurry you," she added, "but——"

De Courchamps took up his hat.

"*C'est le dernier mot?*" he asked.

"It is."

"Then I will go and write the letters and bring them to you in exchange for yours," he said, and he moved towards the door.

The duchess arrested him by a gesture.

"You can write here; there is no time for you to go elsewhere," she said, and she motioned him to a writing-table as she spoke.

De Courchamps turned round savagely.

"You are dictatorial, madame!" he said.

"That, monsieur, was my intention," she replied, and she consulted the clock as she

spoke. "If the letters are not ready in ten minutes, I shall order the carriage."

"And these papers?" he demanded.

"I will fetch them while you write," she answered, and she left the room.

As the door closed behind her, de Courchamps flung down the pen he had taken up, and relaxing the iron hold he had hitherto kept upon his features, he let the rage within him paint livid lines upon his face. Furious thoughts were tearing headlong through his brain; everything that had happened in those days of March, ten long years back, passed with the velocity of lightning before his eyes, painted in all life's vivid colours, not a touch wrong nor a tone amiss. And this woman, with her cold face and her clear voice, knew it all, even as he himself. Yet— No! One thing she did not know. That hurried journey of his back to Rome, taken in alarm and anxiety when no news came of his telegram or of Francesca. Of that the duchess knew nothing. She had not heard the spurious tale of insistent work peremptorily claiming his presence at Rome, so soon as the danger that had threatened his uncle lifted. She had not

seen the hurried preparations, the rapid journey, with its sleepless night, its slow, glaring day, and then the night again. He only knew what he had suffered; how the cry of agony within him had drowned the groaning of the wheels as the train sped onwards, swiftly at times, slowly, ah! how slowly, at others; yet ever onwards. Once again René de Courchamps stood upon the familiar platform of the Rome station. Hurriedly, anxiously, he glanced to right, to left. Should he see some smiling, friendly face; find hands outstretched in welcome? Or—*did they know?* The question had seared his brain. It had remained unsolved. For him the station had held neither friend nor foe. Then had come the drive in the early morning light through the narrow paved streets. Once more he saw the tall houses between which here and there would come some weirdly sudden break; a bit of ruin, or some creeper covered stone, setting their seal upon the street as verily of Rome. The fountains splashed and bubbled in the sunshine, the flower girls spread their blossoms lavishly upon the stalls, the little yellow Roman dogs lay before their owners' doors,

stretched out in all the beatitude of animals to whom sunshine is life; on and on rolled the cab. Would it never reach Francesca's humble lodging? At last the wheels had grated on the kerb. It had not taken him long to mount the steep stair leading to her rooms. How still they had seemed! How silent they had remained, although he rang, and knocked, and rang again; louder and louder as anxiety and alarm grew and strengthened. Yet no answer came. At last he had ceased his knocking and had bent his ear to listen, straining every nerve to hear if there might be some faintest sound within. None came. He turned despairingly away, and there directly facing him, peering curiously through the partially opened door of the opposite apartment, was the wizened, witchlike face of an old crone who had sometimes aided Francesca in her household work. The sight of her wizened face had been welcome as a vision from heaven. He had questioned her eagerly. Francesca was gone, she said. Then she had told him of the accident, of how they had taken her to the hospital. Beyond that she knew nothing; the hospital was a long way off, and

she was old. He had tarried to hear no more. His cab awaited him, and he drove swiftly to the hospital.

Francesca was dead, they told him. Poor little Francesca! How pretty she had been, and how she had loved him! For a moment he had felt sad as he stood there in the sunshine on the steps of the hospital where she had died. Then he had recollected that she had held his secret, and he remembered that death is a confidant no man need fear. His secret was safe. She had left no papers—had said that she had no relatives, they had told him, and as he had re-entered his cab, it had seemed to him that the sunshine was warmer, mellower, the world fairer, life better worth the living, than he had ever known it. True, Francesca was dead, but life to her, poor child, had meant love, and—she had had her day.

"Fool that I was!" he cried aloud, as the old memories crowded close about him; "fool that I was!" and his clenched hand fell upon the table, making the glass bottles of the ink-stand jar and jangle in their sockets, while the flowers within the bowl that stood beside it trembled violently, and shed a few soft petals

on the velvet cloth. "They told me that a lady with the face of an angel had been to see her," he continued. "An angel! *Mon Dieu!*" His laugh rang bitterly through the empty room. "How could I guess that it was *she!* Why, she's not even a woman! She's a Fate!"

His restless eyes fell upon the clock as he spoke; he started, and catching up the pen he had thrown down, he wrote rapidly. What use to wait to weigh his words? The time for that had gone by. He flung the first letter finished on one side, and without staying to address it, he seized another sheet of note-paper and wrote on without thought or pause.

He was still writing when the portière of the door facing him was pushed back, and the duchess re-entered the room; as she let the curtain swing to behind her, she made a slight sign to some one in the room beyond.

At the rustle of her gown, de Courchamps looked up.

"Are the letters finished, monsieur?" she asked.

"One moment, madame," he said, and hurriedly addressing two envelopes, he thrust

the sheets of note-paper therein and came forward, the letters in his hand.

Helen Deerham's hands were empty.

De Courchamps stopped short. "And our bargain, madame?" he said.

"The packet is here," she answered, and as she spoke, the portière was again pushed aside, and the Duc d'Othmar entered the room, a large envelope in his hand. He bowed silently. De Courchamps started back.

"Madame!" he cried, "M. le Duc has——"

The duchess interrupted him. "Yes," she said, "you are right. M. le Duc has, I fear, heard you incriminate yourself, monsieur; but the letter which you have just addressed to him will seal his lips. Is it not so?" She turned to d'Othmar as she spoke.

"*Parfaitement, madame,*" he answered.

De Courchamps turned savagely upon his heel.

"Trapped!" he muttered.

"M. le Duc will give you the packet, monsieur, if you will kindly hand me those papers," said the duchess.

Slowly, reluctantly, he held them out to

her; they were not fastened, and quickly drawing them from their envelopes, she glanced rapidly over their contents. As she did so, d'Othmar gave the packet he held to de Courchamps. The duchess looked up from the letters.

"Adieu, monsieur," she said coldly. "In return for the letter which you have been so good as to address to him, M. le Duc has promised me that he will continue to extend to you the same measure of acknowledgment as heretofore"; she turned interrogatively to d'Othmar.

"*Parfaitement, madame,*" he once more responded suavely, and he bowed as he spoke.

De Courchamps also bowed; but there was an evil sneer upon his lips.

"*Adieu, madame,*" he said, "I trust that the *amours* of your friends, so kindly taken under your protection, will prosper." Then he turned upon his heel and left the room.

"*Canaille!*" d'Othmar exclaimed, and he made a step towards the door. De Courchamps, however, had closed it behind him. Even in defeat and death a wasp can sting, and de Courchamps intended that his sting

should stay. The duchess, however, paid no heed to his words; for those who deal with deeds, phrases are apt to lose their significance. She threw herself upon the sofa.

"Thank Heaven, that is over!" she exclaimed. "You seconded me ably, monsieur."

"I did my best, madame. I am at your service always, but you must pardon my stupidity if I fail to understand why it was necessary for me to play the eavesdropper, when your possession of those papers made the self-incrimination of monsieur all unimportant."

"*Mon ami*, there were *no* papers," she answered quietly.

D'Othmar started.

"There were no papers!" he echoed, stupefaction in voice and face.

"None!" she said.

"But the envelope I handed to him?" d'Othmar exclaimed.

"Ah, that envelope was my trump card," the duchess answered. "I took the papers out of it, and burnt them before Francesca's eyes ten years ago, and she, poor girl, then begged me to cut off a tress of her hair and to send it to de Courchamps if he should ever make in-

quiries concerning her. I placed the lock of hair in that envelope, and there, with a line of explanation, and sufficient blank paper to give the packet the necessary thickness, M. de Courchamps will find it."

"Astonishing! incredible!" d'Othmar exclaimed. "I am bewildered. The letter was written ten years ago—yet you quoted dates—phrases——"

"Yes! I have a good memory," she said, "and before I started for Paris I knew that there would probably be a difficulty with M. de Courchamps, although of course I never anticipated anything like this. However, I brought with me the diary that I had kept during that winter in Rome. I found my dates there; the rest I remembered. That telegram was so ingenious; one could not forget it."

"You were marvellous!" d'Othmar cried.

She leant back against her cushions.

"Perhaps I was," she said wearily. "I am very tired."

"You have cause to be, madame. You have fought a great fight and won. Now you must rest. *À ce soir.*" He took her hand and raised it to his lips.

"De Courchamps was right," she said slowly, "I trapped him. Had I not done so, he would have trapped Dick Stuart. I had to fight him with his own weapons, and by your help I won. I have not half thanked you, monsieur. You gave him the envelope with such an admirable air. I dared not do it. I feared my self-control would fail me—that my lips or hand would tremble; and if he had opened the envelope, as he probably would have done had I been alone with him, he would have torn those precious letters from me, and—" Her voice broke and she hid her face in her hands.

"Courage, madame. I have the letters," d'Othmar answered. "*Au revoir.*"

"And you keep my unofficial secret?" she said.

"Madame, you have trusted me," he answered. Once more he bent over the slim fingers, then, without farther words he left her, and as his footsteps died away upon the thick carpet of the passage, Helen Deerham flung her arms above her head in the impatient weariness of tense nerves suddenly relaxed.

"Oh, how tired I am!" she exclaimed. "I will go to bed and cry myself to sleep."

She rang the bell.

"I am at home to no one," she said to the servant who answered it, "except to Mme. Dubosc, whom I expect in some two hours' time. She is coming to stay with me; her room is already ordered. I will see no one else—*personne au monde*, you understand, no matter who it is, until seven o'clock, when I expect Captain Stuart."

"*Parfaitement, madame,*" the man answered, and the duchess left the room.

As he closed the door after her, the waiter smiled knowingly. "How they are droll, these English great ladies!" he said. "Mme. la Duchesse seems of a dignity unapproachable, magnificent—yet she receives le Comte René de Courchamps and is at home to no one else while he remains—and he remains long—decidedly long. It is droll, very droll!" He shook his head and went downstairs. It would be more amusing to discuss its drollness there.

CHAPTER XV

A WONDERFUL WOMAN

"I WAS right—yes, I know I was right to come," said the Duke of Deerham, and the determination with which he said it struck the note of nervousness. Perhaps, however, it was inevitable that the meaning of the words should vary somewhat between London and Paris, and by road, rail and sea, the duke had not ceased to repeat them to himself—with conviction while still on English ground: with courage as the steamer sped away from Dover: with doubt as he settled himself in his railway carriage at Calais, and with an admixture of apprehension as his cab rattled through the Paris streets.

He had followed his wife. "Charlie is all very well in his way," he told himself, "but he is not like me."

He thought that his wife would want

him; in reality he wanted his wife. He had felt that it would be impossible to sit through another dinner with her vacant chair facing him. He disliked dining at his club, and he failed to recall any friend whose cook, or conversation, equalled his wife's. She, too, must be lost without him, he told himself; yet as he neared the Hôtel Bristol the recollection that Helen had little liking for any contravention of her plans asserted itself with unpleasant distinctness. He felt it cheering to see Sir Charles Davenant standing at the hotel door as his cab drove up. It is possible to value our friends highly without putting their abilities on a par with our own.

"Hallo, Charlie," he cried, "is my wife in?"

"Not at home, they say," Sir Charles answered, "to me, at any rate; but perhaps she may be to you. Does she expect you?"

"N—no," said the duke, "my coming was just a sudden idea, don't you know. I thought she would want me."

"Ah! very likely," Sir Charles answered. The duke glanced at him sharply, but his face was as expressionless as his words.

"What's the number of her sitting-room?" the duke enquired.

"Thirty-seven."

"Then let us go up: you lead the way," said the duke, and they ascended the staircase, the duchess's rooms being on the first floor.

"This is the antechamber," said Sir Charles, and he indicated a door on their left.

"Then let us go in," said the duke, and turning the handle of the door he flung it wide: the little room was empty. "She will be in the sitting-room, I suppose," he said, and he advanced towards a curtained doorway on the right. As he did so an excited, breathless voice behind him interposed:

"Mme. la Duchesse is not at home, messieurs," it said, its accents tense with nervous anxiety. The duke turned in surprise and faced the heated and greatly perturbed waiter who had hurried up the stairs to bar his way.

"So they said downstairs, but I did not believe them. Where is she?" said the duke.

"I cannot say, monsieur."

"Then send her maid here," he answered, and he threw himself into a chair.

The waiter's excited tones waxed firm. "*Pardon, monsieur*, but I have orders to admit no one to the apartment of madame. Will *ces messieurs* permit that I reconduct them?" He opened the door as he spoke.

The duke yawned.

"These fellows never know anything," he remarked to Sir Charles, who was standing by the table turning over some newspapers.

"Monsieur permits?" the waiter queried, and he opened the door still wider.

"Go and fetch the duchess's maid," the duke said peremptorily.

The man stared.

"Well, are you going?"

"The orders of Mme. la Duchesse were——"

"Yes, yes: I know, but you don't understand. I am the Duke of Deerham," was the impatient answer.

The man bowed low. "*Mille pardons, M. le Duc.* I did not know that madame expected monsieur."

"Go and fetch her maid," the duke said curtly. "What idiots these Frenchmen are!"

he added as the door closed behind the man. "He might have guessed who I was."

"Waiters dare not guess riddles," said Sir Charles, "they keep their places only by forgetting the answers to those they know."

"Now, what on earth do you mean by that?" asked the duke.

Sir Charles feared that he had opened up the way to a cross-examination which might prove awkward. He was, however, spared the pain of explaining himself by the entrance of Ernestine.

She was a pleasant interruption, he thought. Plump, with the well-managed plumpness of a clever Parisienne, her trim, rounded figure clad in a black gown of distinguished simplicity, and her hair so dressed as to give the piquant face a most becoming setting, the duchess's maid would have been agreeable to the eye under any circumstances; but at a moment when the duchess's husband had asked a question which his friend had no desire to answer, she was not only agreeable—she was apt. The secret of popularity through life lies in its entries and exits; usually both are made at the wrong

time and place. Ernestine, however, made hers at the precise moment when Sir Charles wanted her. He felt that he should always like that woman.

"Your grace sent for me?" she said interrogatively.

"Yes: where is her grace?"

"*Mme. la Duchesse* is lying down. She has a headache."

"Well, they said she was out," the duke exclaimed. "I will go up at once." He hurried to the door, but Ernestine intercepted him.

"Pardon, your grace, but the orders of *Mme. la Duchesse* were that she was not to be disturbed for anybody in the world."

"But she didn't expect *me!*" cried the duke.

The maid glanced up at him, an enigmatic expression in her bright brown eyes.

"*Vraiment, monsieur,*" she said simply.

Something in look or tone appeared to annoy the duke. "Don't talk French to me. You know I hate it," he said irritably. "Show me her grace's room."

Once more the maid's enigmatic look met his.

"Does your grace remember the last time Mme. la Duchesse had a headache and was lying down quietly in her room?" she asked. "M. le Duc went in—" she paused; it seemed that the duke's recollection finished the sentence.

"Well, well, perhaps you are right," he said hurriedly. "When are you to go to her grace?"

"At half-past six, monsieur."

"Then go and tell them to send up some whisky and soda," said the duke.

"Yes, your grace," Ernestine answered, and she flitted lightly from the room.

The duke turned to Sir Charles.

"What does this mean, Charlie?" he demanded. "Helen lying down with a headache!"

"Well, I must say she has a right to a headache if ever a woman had," Sir Charles answered as he laid down his newspaper and went over to the fireplace. "I hope it's a comfort to her!"

"What on earth do you mean?" cried the duke.

"My dear Deerham," said Sir Charles,

and he spoke slowly and weightily, "your wife is a wonderful woman."

"Good Lord! man, I know that. I've been married to her for twenty years," the duke cried impatiently.

"Ah! and you still think her so? She *is* a wonderful woman," Sir Charles commented drily.

"For heaven's sake, don't go on repeating yourself like that," the duke exclaimed as he walked fussily up and down the room. "You don't know what a state of anxiety I've been in. I could not stop at home a moment longer, thinking of her mixing herself up in all this shady business with only you to look after her! At least—I mean—of course, old chap, I knew you would do everything you possibly could, and it was awfully good of you to come—I am very much obliged to you, I assure you—but you don't know how to manage her, now do you?"

"No," said Sir Charles, and he spoke with conviction, "that I certainly do not; but, my dear Deerham, I have only had to look on: she—" he checked himself as the waiter brought in the whisky and soda.

"Have a drink?" said the duke, and he filled two tumblers. Sir Charles sipped his, set down his glass and took up the broken thread of his sentence.

"Your wife has managed the whole affair," he said. "She is an extraordinary woman. My dear Deerham, if it hadn't been for her there'd have been a most awful scandal. I have just left d'Othmar. He told me all about it—he is telling every one."

The duke's mouth opened wide, and its corners drooped in a dreadful dismay.

"Telling every one that the duchess—" he gasped.

"No, no; of course her name doesn't appear," Sir Charles interrupted hastily. "I told you she was a wonderful woman. D'Othmar will explain it all. He is dining here, and so am I."

"Capital!" cried the duke, his fears dissipated, "and it can't be far off dinner-time, at least I hope it isn't. Let us go and dress."

CHAPTER XVI

DICK'S DECISION

"It appears," said Ernestine as she entered the duchess' sitting-room some half hour later, two large bouquets in her hand and a beautiful basket of roses on her arm, "it appears that the beauty of madame is having a summer of St. Luke. Ah! I dress her very well." She placed the basket on a marble *console* as she spoke, and glanced at the card attached to it. "From Captain Stuart," she read. "Englishmen always send roses: they remind them of their stupid wars, I suppose. Fighting and eating are the only things they care about." She held one of the bouquets towards the light as she spoke. "Now look at this!" she cried; "what *chic*, what taste!" Again she consulted the card. "Ah! from the Duc d'Othmar, *ça se comprend.*" She placed the flowers in a promi-

nent position at one end of the mantelpiece; then she glanced critically at the other bouquet: she shook her head slightly. "Inferior," she said, "inferior decidedly; but it must do for the other end," and she put it opposite the orchids sent by d'Othmar. "We must not disappoint the good Sir Charles," she added, and her tone was full of condescension. "I like him and his nice English French. It is so honest."

She drew back to survey her handiwork: as she did so the door behind her was thrown open.

"Mme. Dubosc," the waiter announced.

Ernestine turned quickly and found herself confronted by a slim, and very graceful, girlish-looking figure; the face was hidden by a thick veil.

"Ah, her grace is expecting madame," the maid exclaimed. "I must hasten to inform her of madame's arrival. Permit me to take madame's coat?"

With a word of thanks Alice Dubosc handed it to her, and Ernestine left the room.

Alice threw herself into a chair. "Is it, can it be true?" she asked herself. "Have I

escaped?" Her eyes wandered around the room.

There was a solidity about its comfort which seemed essentially English, although in reality it merely meant that the talented management of the Hôtel Bristol understood English tastes and their own interests. Alice, however, forgot the management, and as she leant back in her chair and fingered the illustrated English papers that lay beside the Times on a table at her elbow, she felt that she had touched English territory at last.

"Thank God!" she murmured softly, "thank God!"

Suddenly her eyes fell upon the basket of roses: they, too, spoke of home. She crossed the room and buried her face in their soft petals. How cool, how fragrant they were! She rested her cheek lightly, caressingly, upon them. What was that? Not a thorn, yet—Quickly she raised her face. A card protruded edgewise from amongst the flowers: its sharp corner had pricked her cheek. Quickly, thoughtlessly, she pulled it out, and slipping from her fingers it fell face upwards on the cloth. It was Dick Stuart's name that

she saw. With a low cry she hid her face in her hands.

"Oh, Dick, Dick, what must you have thought of me?" she whispered, and her voice broke in a low sob.

The door behind her opened gently, so gently that she failed to hear it, and only felt a kindly arm about her shoulder, heard a kindly voice exclaim:

"My dear Alice, tears because you have come to stay with me! I can't allow that, you know."

Mme. Dubosc rose and flung her arms around the duchess's neck.

"It's not that: you know it isn't. You have saved me!" she cried.

"I hope so," the duchess said, and she seated herself upon the sofa and drew Alice down beside her.

Mme. Dubosc seized her hand and kissed it.

"I think I should have died if you had not come," she said. "When, after you had seen M. Dubosc to-day, he told me that you would come again, and that I must see you, I was afraid; but when you came, and—and

said you could save *him*—and that you would take me away, that you had got Gaston's consent, I— Oh, I can never tell you, never show you what you have done for me."

The duchess took her in her arms and kissed her.

"My dear, I know," she said, "and now go and take off your hat. Dick will be here directly, and I expect George's telegram about that appointment every moment. Remember Dick's decision rests with you."

"Then he accepts," Alice answered, and her voice was firm, though her lips quivered like a child's.

Once more the duchess kissed her, and there were tears in her eyes when they followed the slender figure from the room. As the heavy folds of the portière fell behind her Helen Deerham sighed.

"I am sorry for Dick," she said. "That's a woman worth loving. She, poor thing, will have one consolation: when a man leaves a woman against his will, he always goes on loving her."

CHAPTER XVII

WITH THE EYES OF MADAME

"Good Lord!" said Captain Stuart; "Good Lord!"

He was standing in the centre of his sitting-room, an open letter in his hand. He had read and re-read it, yet it seemed that the sense of it had scarcely passed from eyes to brain.

The clock on the mantelpiece chimed the hour: he thrust the letter into his pocket and, rushing from the room, hurried down the stairs and in a few seconds was knocking at the door of the Duchess of Deerham's apartments.

"Come in," she said.

He needed no second bidding: scarcely had the words died upon her lips when he was holding both her hands in his, pouring out eager, incoherent words.

"My dear Dick, don't excite yourself," she said, smiling, "the storm is past."

"Thanks to you!" he cried. "You said you would work a miracle for me, and, by Heaven! you've done it. Look: he retracts—apologises; *de Courchamps* apologises!" He thrust the letter into her hand; but she gave it only a passing glance.

"I have seen it," she said; "I thought it quite a proper letter."

"Quite—a—proper—letter," he echoed.

"*Quite a proper letter when*—" The duchess finished his sentence: "When M. de Courchamps discovered that he had been in error he retracted and apologised. It was the obvious course," she said.

"And so like de Courchamps," Dick exclaimed sarcastically.

"My dear boy, we can't all of us play up to our parts always. Inconsistency is the redeeming feature of humanity. If we always knew what to expect of ourselves and of one another, we should cut our throats and be done with it."

"You have saved me from cutting mine,"

he said gravely; "I can't thank you, duchess; it's too big a thing, but——"

"Nonsense," she said. "It was only a little bit of atonement. Not to you, my dear boy—to Alice."

He turned abruptly away. "What a brute and a fool I have been!" he cried. "She has written to me. She——"

"I know," the duchess interrupted. "I went to her when I left you this morning."

"And she told you?"

"Everything; having previously made an equally circumstantial statement to M. Dubosc, who informed her that she was hysterical, and refused to listen to her. Then, at last, she shook off her fear of him and vowed that unless he would go to de Courchamps and make him declare the truth, which it appears he already knew, she would go to him herself. She is very young, and Dubosc's orders that she should not be allowed to leave the house, *as it might endanger her health,* can scarcely be regretted."

Dick clenched his hands angrily. "And I thought— Oh, how could I—I might have known——"

"Yes; you might have known," said the duchess, "but, you see, you didn't. You thought she had neither the courage to stand by you, nor to run away with you. I wonder why you are so sure that you can fill her whole life with happiness when you know so little about her as that."

"Don't," he cried imploringly. "I was a brute, a fool——"

"You were thinking of yourself instead of thinking of her. That's all," she said. "Most of us think of ourselves first."

"By God, I will make it up to her!" he cried.

"I hope not—in your fashion," she answered drily.

"I could marry her," he said doggedly.

"Possibly—as a postscript," the duchess commented. "I suppose you never read Clarissa Harlowe; young men never read what's good for them. If you had, you might remember her remark as to a man's depriving himself of his wife's virtue. It's a mistake: he's bound to miss it."

"She is an angel!" he cried.

"H'm," said the duchess. "I have ob-

served that angels are usually other men's wives. That is the reason why you must leave England."

"Leave England! I can't do that—I——"

"You promised to do whatever Alice should bid you," the duchess said quietly. "She is in there; go and ask her."

She pointed to the portière that screened the entrance to an inner room. For one second Dick hesitated, and seemed about to speak; then he strode across the room, lifted the curtain and disappeared.

Helen Deerham sighed impatiently.

"Oh, dear, I do wish that telegram would come!" she murmured. "George can't refuse me; he never does, and habit is everything with men, especially with soldiers. Ah!" The door opened, but it was her husband, not his brother's telegram, that it admitted. "Tom!" she cried.

"My darling!" he responded, and he kissed her warmly. "I couldn't help following you. I really couldn't. To think of you over here, mixing yourself up with—oh, my dear, you are a wonderful woman, and I'm

proud of you, but you mustn't do it again; indeed, you mustn't. I can't allow it. Now, really I can't."

The duchess smiled, and slipped her slim fingers within his square ones.

"My dear Tom, I assure you I have no wish to do it again," she said; "it was very fatiguing."

"My poor darling!" the duke exclaimed, and he put his arm about her waist, but hurriedly dropped it, as a servant opened the door, and in stentorian tones announced:

"M. le Duc d'Othmar; Sir Charles Davenant."

"Ah, how do you do, d'Othmar!" cried the Duke of Deerham as he shook hands heartily. "I hear you have marvellous things to tell me of my wife. She's a wonderful woman!"

"Wonderful!" cried Sir Charles; "she's prodigious! I begin to think that Eve left Eden in order to give the duchess a chance of rearranging the world."

Helen Deerham laughed. "Thanks, Sir Charles. That sounds charming, but I find the rearrangement of my toilettes quite

enough in the remodelling line. Besides, what is there so very extraordinary in the fact that an apology has been made for a mistake?"

"Oh, is that the view we are to take?" Sir Charles inquired drily.

"Why, of course. What other view is there? M. de Courchamps, whose violent temper is well known, is also known to have detested Dick. He lost heavily to him at cards when he could not afford to lose at all, and, in the heat of the moment, made an absurd accusation. He has withdrawn it and the affair is closed." The air with which she leant back against her cushions was final.

D'Othmar bowed low. "We see with the eyes of madame," he said.

"Thank you, monsieur," she answered. "Ah!" A waiter had entered the room, holding a salver upon which lay a thin blue envelope. She tore it open, read it, and handed it to her husband.

"Thank Heaven!" she said, and she read it fervently.

"May one ask?" d'Othmar queried.

"Oh, of course. It's from George, Deer-

ham's brother, you know. He has just got an Indian governorship and he is going to make Dick Stuart his aide-de-camp."

D'Othmar sighed.

"They are so young, so handsome," he said. "It seems almost a pity."

"Will he go?" Sir Charles asked.

"She is to decide," the duchess answered.

"*Chère* madame, is that wise?" d'Othmar inquired. "Does not one of your poets say, 'His only books were woman's looks, and——'"

The duchess finished the quotation.

"'Folly all they taught him,'" she cried. "But, then, you see, he only looked at her and listened to himself. If he had let the lady *speak*, doubtless she would have taught him wisdom!"

As she spoke, the folding doors of an adjoining room were thrown open and disclosed a small round dinner-table laid for four.

"*Madame est servie*," said the servant.

The duchess turned to d'Othmar with a gesture of apology. "One moment," she said, and crossing to the writing table, she took up a case of telegraph forms and a pen-

cil. She laid the telegram she had just received upon the case and handed it and the pencil to the servant. "Give this to Captain Stuart when he leaves," she said. "Ask him to write out an answer and bring it to me."

"*Bien, madame,*" the man answered.

The duchess turned again to d'Othmar.

"And now," she said, "let us dine."

CHAPTER XVIII

DUTY

DICK had gone. She had sent him away. It had, she knew, been her duty so to do; yet, as she stood within the curtain of the hotel window and watched his tall figure striding rapidly across the brightly lighted Place Vendôme, it seemed to Alice Dubosc that duty was a dreary thing indeed, worth nothing in the world; a world which in truth held for her but one thing worth the having, the thing she had renounced. Alice had, like most of us, been taught her duty to God and man, yet the knowledge brought her no comfort. She knew one thing only. She wanted Dick, and she had sent him away. With a little moan she let the heavy curtain fall. Dick had passed out of sight, out of reach, out of her life. How would she live that life without him? she asked herself, and suddenly

before her eyes flashed, in vivid panorama, all those past days in which his presence had, all unacknowledged, meant so much to her. How short, and yet how long, the time of their acquaintance seemed! Calendars cannot control time: they can but ticket it with misleading labels, setting the mark of months upon a few brief moments of joy, and sealing some year of misery as a bare week. In the mirror that stood opposite the window Alice saw her face and figure vividly reflected as she let the heavy curtain fall across the glass behind her. How young she was! How many years she would have to live! She was indeed so young that the vista before her appeared interminable. The three score years and ten allotted to man seems ever a too lavish tale to youth, for age is unlike other possessions, in that it never seems worth the attainment until it is attained, and then, who cares to let it go? Alice dreaded the years before her; but cold comfort can ever be found in the reflection that forgetfulness comes with the years, and no such thought crossed her brain. That she and Dick would love each other always she never doubted.

She did not dream of that sorrow, deeper far than any pain of parting, which comes when love and beauty die. She was too young to understand the tragedy of that famous answer, given by the erstwhile French beauty to one who, in the days of that beauty's power, had loved her madly, yet who failed in age to recognise aught of what he had adored in youth. He met her as a stranger; failed to hear her name, and in talking of days long past he asked her whether *she herself* still lived. She shook her head. "*Elle n'est plus,*" she answered. It was true: what had been was no longer. Alice, however, knew but two tenses in the verb of life, present and future. She loved and was loved, and that so she would always love and be loved she never doubted; wherefore her suffering was less than she believed. To her love was a romance, and to woman there is ever beauty in romance.

With Dick, however, it was otherwise. There are few men to whom romance appeals at any time; fewer still for whom it has a personal application. He shared with Alice the conviction that his love would last, but

for him there lay no comfort in the consciousness. Memory for him meant merely the torture of Tantalus.

Something of this the Duchess of Deerham guessed when she re-entered her sitting-room and found her telegram-case face downward on the floor. D'Othmar, who had followed her, stooped to pick it up. She took it from him and smoothed the disordered leaves with a care that was almost a caress. D'Othmar believed that he divined her feelings.

"Poor Dick!" he said.

The duchess raised her eyes from the thin, crumpled sheets.

"Poor George!" she answered.

The Frenchman's delicate eyebrows arched inquiringly.

"You think that Lord George will not find his new aide-de-camp an enlivening companion?" he queried.

"I never think about what I know," she answered. "But, after all, George isn't married, and a man must have something to put up with."

"So you send him Dick," said d'Othmar. "I think I too will say 'Poor George!'"

CHAPTER XIX

CANCELLED DEBTS

THE Marquis de Grandcour was anxious. He had seen the Duc d'Othmar at his club, had seen the letter he had received from René de Courchamps, acknowledging his mistake, stating that he had sent an apology to Captain Stuart, and begging d'Othmar to assist him in setting matters straight. De Grandcour was not clever, but he was quite capable of connected thought, especially where his own interests were involved, and it occurred to him that under the circumstances M. Dubosc was unlikely to remain long in Paris. Now, M. Dubosc owed him a large sum of money, and he remembered that outstanding debts cannot safely be counted as capital. When, therefore, he had dined (de Grandcour always treated his digestion with respect), he called a *fiacre* and drove to the

Duboscs' flat. It took him only a few moments to reach it, but once there he found his business but little advanced, as the concierge most strenuously objected to his going upstairs; monsieur was engaged, he said. De Grandcour replied that his business was urgent. The concierge answered that M. Dubosc was not well; that a doctor had been summoned. De Grandcour felt it necessary to inquire for him; the concierge suggested that quiet was essential; de Grandcour replied that he would attend to that; and, pushing past the man, he hurried up the staircase and rang the bell at M. Dubosc's door. A servant maid with a scared face opened it.

"Is M. Dubosc at home?" de Grandcour asked.

"Yes, monsieur; that is, no— Oh, monsieur, he will never be at home again!" the girl cried piteously. De Grandcour stared at her in amazement; she was apparently incapable of any lucid statement. He pushed past her, and, crossing the hall, he opened the door of the salon. What he saw arrested his steps.

Dubosc was stretched stiff and rigid on the

floor; a man with his back to de Grandcour was bending over him, trying with an obviously professional skill to find some sign of life; beside the mantelpiece, his face white and drawn, his eyes prominent, stood René de Courchamps.

At the sound of the opening door the doctor looked up; then he rose. "It is no use," he said. "He is quite dead."

"*Mon Dieu! mon Dieu!*" de Courchamps groaned, and he buried his head in his hands.

"What — what has happened?" de Grandcour stammered.

The doctor glanced interrogatively at de Courchamps, but he still stood with his back to them, his face hidden.

"I understand," the doctor said slowly, his eyes still fixed upon de Courchamps's averted head, "that M. le Comte came to see M. Dubosc about a little matter of business of a somewhat unpleasant nature. There was unfortunately a quarrel. M. le Comte, it appears, said something which M. Dubosc resented, and in his anger he seized M. le Comte by the collar; he flung him off, and M. Dubosc, it appears, caught his foot in the

rug and fell with his head against the mantelpiece. This, at least, is what I comprehend." Once more he paused; but no one spoke. "Death was evidently instantaneous," he added gravely.

De Courchamps raised his haggard face.

"I did not strike him," he said. "I only shook myself free. It was that damned rug that did it."

The doctor bowed, and turned to de Grandcour.

"Mme. Dubosc is not, I understand, in the house. Do you know her present address, monsieur?" he said.

"No," de Grandcour answered, "but I could probably ascertain it."

"I should be greatly obliged," the doctor responded, and with one last, swift look at the rigid figure lying at his feet, de Grandcour left the room and hastened down the stairs and out of the house: his one idea to get into the open air, to escape from the presence of these two, the living man looking at the dead.

"Hôtel d'Othmar. Avenue—," he cried, as he sprang into the waiting cab.

Sir Charles Davenant had walked home with d'Othmar from the Bristol. It was a beautifully clear, frosty night; both men were thoughtful, and the sky is a better roof for thought than the stuffy canopy of a cab.

As they neared d'Othmar's hotel Sir Charles broke the silence.

"What a woman, what a wonderful woman!" he exclaimed. "I never thought Dick would take that appointment."

D'Othmar removed the cigar from his lips.

"That was very English," he said slowly. "But, after all, virtue suits your type of woman."

They turned into the courtyard of his hotel as he spoke.

"A gentleman awaits M. le Duc," said the porter.

"At this hour?" said d'Othmar, and he raised his delicately pencilled eyebrows in surprise.

"Monsieur said it was of the greatest importance," the concierge explained.

"Who is it?" d'Othmar queried.

"M. le Marquis de Grandcour."

"De Grandcour!" d'Othmar exclaimed. "Then it *must* be important," he added, turning to Sir Charles. "De Grandcour is not the man to make such a *démarche* unnecessarily. He is eminently correct."

They passed up the staircase to the room in which the uninvited guest awaited them.

De Grandcour rose as they entered.

"A thousand pardons, M. le Duc," he began, but d'Othmar interrupted him.

"Always charmed to see you, *mon cher*," he said. "Sit down, I beg."

De Grandcour, however, was too excited to sit.

"I have news, great, startling news," he said. "I came to you for the address of Mme. Dubosc."

"Ah! then it concerns her?"

"Closely. I have just come from Dubosc."

"From Dubosc," Sir Charles cried. "You don't mean to say that he has made you his ambassador!"

"No; he has given me no commission," de Grandcour answered. "I will explain," and he turned to d'Othmar. "When, this

evening, you showed me de Courchamps's letter," he said, "it occurred to me that Dubosc was unlikely to remain long in Paris. I therefore went to see him—a little matter of money, you understand?"

"Perfectly," d'Othmar answered. "You naturally desired that he should pay you, and he, as naturally, declined to do so."

"No, monsieur, he did not decline: but he has cancelled all his debts."

"What do you mean?" the two men cried in one breath.

"The dead are no man's debtors," de Grandcour said gravely.

"The dead!" Sir Charles echoed. D'Othmar turned silently away.

"Was it—suicide?" he asked.

"Oh, no. It appears that he had some quarrel with de Courchamps: a struggle ensued, and Dubosc fell with his head against the mantelpiece."

"I am surprised," said d'Othmar. "I had thought that, in fighting, de Courchamps still used the weapons of a gentleman."

"But is he really dead?" Sir Charles enquired excitedly.

"Oh, yes. The doctor, whom I found there, said that death must have been instantaneous."

"Ah! marble hits hard," D'Othmar commented. "It seems a pity that de Courchamps could not be similarly accommodated."

"He appeared almost beside himself," de Grandcour said.

"It is manslaughter, I suppose—even in France?" Sir Charles queried.

"*Qui sait?*" said d'Othmar, "but let us hope for the best. He turned to de Grandcour.

"*Un petit verre de cognac?*" he suggested. De Grandcour accepted.

"You have not given me Mme. Dubosc's address," he said.

"She is at the Hôtel Bristol with the Duchess of Deerham," d'Othmar answered; then he turned to Sir Charles. "It seems probable," he added drily, "that Lord George Wentworth will have to look out for another aide-de-camp."

De Grandcour stared.

"By Jove, yes!" said Sir Charles.

D'Othmar raised his glass of cognac in his hand. "I have a toast to propose," he said. "To the memory of the duchess."

De Grandcour's astonished gaze grew wider.

"But—but she's alive," he objected.

D'Othmar smiled.

"And that is why I drink to her memory," he said, and he put the glass to his lips. De Grandcour did likewise: he comprehended nothing, but the Duc d'Othmar was the Petronius Arbiter of Paris.

"To the memory of the duchess," he repeated, and he too raised his glass. Sir Charles did likewise.

"The duchess! God bless her," he cried, and his glass, with d'Othmar's, shattered on the floor behind them.

The Marquis de Grandcour's glass followed theirs. It is not by comprehension but by imitation that most men are *à la mode.*

EPILOGUE

WRIT IN GOLD

"POSITIVELY," said the Duc d'Othmar, as his valet drew back the curtains and pulled up the blinds of his room in Dover Street, "positively, London looks gay."

"Indeed, yes, monsieur," the valet responded suavely, as he handed him a little tray upon which hot milk and coffee, rolls and butter were set out, "the streets are full of carriages and cabs, and there are many people walking also, many ladies even, and their frocks, monsieur, are charming—almost like Paris."

"Ah, yes," d'Othmar remarked reflectively, and he sipped his coffee, "dress is the great agent of civilization: it may yet unite the nations."

"*Plait-il, monsieur?*" said the valet.

"Oh, nothing— At least, yes; you may

prepare my bath. I have slept late after my journey, and since you say so many ladies are already abroad, it is certainly time that I dressed."

"*Bien, monsieur,*" said the man, and he disappeared into the bath-room which adjoined his master's bed-chamber.

D'Othmar finished his coffee and, rising, threw on a dressing-gown, and strolling over to the window looked out into the busy street.

"Eight years since I have been in London!" he ejaculated. "Apparently it has in no way changed, except that the weather is positively fine." He turned away from the window and found himself confronting his mirror; the clear morning light shining full upon the features, defining their contour and accentuating every line and wrinkle with a cruel clearness. D'Othmar sighed.

"Why," he asked, and his tone was mournful, "why do not skins wear as well as streets?" He drew an easy chair towards the window and scanned the houses opposite as he spoke. "They even have the same flowers," he said, as he observed the window-

boxes in which pink geraniums and ox-eyed daisies were running riot. "If it were not for my looking-glass, and for an occasional twinge of my vile gout, it might be Alice's wedding-day again. Dear beauty, how sweet she looked! Ah! why was she not born five-and-twenty years later, or I five-and-twenty years earlier? *Mon Dieu!* I believe that I should positively have married her—and then there would have been no inheritance for Luc's boy! I should not have minded that!" He paused, and a smile curved the corners of his mouth as the vision of what his brother's disappointment would have been rose within his mind. "I wonder," he said slowly, "would marriage have been tolerable even with Alice? Dick seems to find it more than tolerable, but then he is an Englishman, and Englishmen are such creatures of habit. They get used to everything—even bad cooks. I wonder, by the bye, what would have become of Dick if I had married Alice?" He paused to let the problem unfold itself before him; it was not, however, difficult to solve.

For upwards of fifty years the Duc d'Oth-

mar had enjoyed the world's best gifts: he felt that, had they met as rivals, Dick must have been discomfited. Once more he smiled, the smile of magnanimity. "The five-and-twenty years, however, separate us," he said, "so Dick has won her, and I am not sure that he does not deserve her better than I should have done; though, after all, no woman has ever yet loved a man because he deserved it," and with the air of a person who feels that upon one subject at least he has nothing left to learn, the Duc d'Othmar went into his bath-room and commenced his somewhat elaborate toilette.

. . . . . .

An hour later he strolled into the park, and selecting a chair between Hyde Park Corner and Stanhope Gate, he lighted a cigarette and turned his attention to the toilettes which his valet had declared almost Parisian. The park was very full. Barouches, broughams, victorias, phaetons, and ralli carts rolled gaily by, or drew up beside the pathway to let their occupants chat with friends sitting, or strolling, in the shade of the trees.

"There's a pretty frock," a man next d'Othmar remarked to the lady with him. The Frenchman's eyes followed those of the Englishman; a tall, slim girl with a big black hat, dressed in white muslin with a pale green sash about her waist, was advancing towards them. D'Othmar smiled. How like an Englishman, he thought, to admire anything so absolutely unimaginative: an Englishman's idea of dress never soared above white muslin and a sash for the young, black velvet and lace for the old. Now the toilette of the lady with whom the girl was walking really had *cachet*. It—the lady moved her parasol, and D'Othmar, with a little pleased exclamation of surprise, rose and went towards her, hat in hand.

"What, you in England, monsieur? I thought you had altogether forsworn our skies and our society."

"*Chère madame*, under such a sky, in such society, one believes in heaven," D'Othmar answered with a bow.

"Yes! while the sun shines," said the lady, and she shook her head. She had seen many English summers.

"And *while* the smile lasts," d'Othmar added.

"Ah, smiles are a sorry substitute for sunshine," said the lady. "But let us sit down. I want to hear all your news: the news of eight years."

"*Chère madame*, those that were happy have no history, and I will not vex your kind heart with the history of those that were otherwise," he answered, and he took a chair beside her.

"Which means that you do not trust me," said the lady. "But never mind: here comes Sir Charles Davenant, and he will betray you. Diplomatists always divulge everything. They think it Bismarckian." As she spoke Sir Charles stopped abruptly in front of them.

"Why, d'Othmar, I didn't know you had arrived," he cried, and grasped his hand warmly as he spoke.

"Neither did I, until I awoke this morning," d'Othmar answered, "and then I could not believe it. Even you must admit that this sky and sunshine suggest anything rather than England."

"I never make admissions," said Sir Charles. "They are always used against one."

"That is what the duke himself thinks," said the lady. "He refuses to tell me his past."

"*Chère madame,* who in the presence of Lady Brentwater can remember a past?" d'Othmar queried suavely.

"Anybody—who looks at her daughter; which, by the bye, you haven't done, monsieur," she responded promptly. "I forgot about her. Ursula, I must introduce you to the Duc d'Othmar. You are not out, and I am not sure that if you were you ought to know him, but still, now I've remembered you, I must run the risk."

The girl smiled; and as she looked up from under the shadow of her big black hat, d'Othmar observed that she had very pretty eyes. Girls, however, did not interest him. He bowed low and made some trivial remark. Lady Brentwater detected the triviality and rose.

"I am getting hungry," she announced, "and we are lunching in Portman Square.

Come, Ursula. *Au revoir, monsieur.* Come to see me—any day you please, after six."

"Then *à demain,*" said d'Othmar, and as Lady Brentwater and her daughter turned away, he relapsed contentedly into his chair.

"Daughters and dogs should not be taken out walking," he remarked. "They obstruct the traffic."

"Then it is well that you have come to London," said Sir Charles, "for now you can exercise your god-parental authority and forbid Miss Violet Stuart to walk out with her mother."

"Ah! Violet walks out with her mother," d'Othmar repeated. "They must be a pretty pair."

"They are mother and daughter," Sir Charles responded drily.

"Generalisations are the resource of weak minds," said d'Othmar. "Have a cigarette?"

Sir Charles laughed, and took one.

"Tell me your news," he said.

"My dear friend, you are as foolish as Lady Brentwater. Who cares to tell of failure? Who cares to listen to successes?"

"As cynical as ever, I see," Sir Charles commented. "If, however, you have no faith in my sympathy with your successes—they would make a large demand, I know—you might at least tell me of other people's failures. Who has gone under, who has tried to rise upon his carcase, who has taken a wife, who has taken some one else's wife?"

"De Courchamps has taken a wife," said d'Othmar, and he carefully knocked the ash from his cigarette.

"Whose?" Sir Charles queried.

"Strange to say, she was unattached," d'Othmar answered. "De Courchamps, who, by the bye, is now Marquis de St. Ouen, has become respectable."

"The devil he has!" Sir Charles ejaculated.

"The devil, no doubt, has done much for him," said D'Othmar, "and now he is testing the capabilities of an angel, in the shape of the charming girl, fresh from her convent, whom he has married."

"What on earth were her people about?" Sir Charles demanded.

"They were much occupied in ascertain-

ing the exact revenues of the St. Ouen estates and in arranging the settlements."

"Psha!" said Sir Charles.

"Settlements, my dear Sir Charles, are permanent; sentiments are not. The lady's people were wise, and she seems quite content. She has a baby."

"Good Lord!" Sir Charles exclaimed excitedly, and he wiped his brow nervously. It was a very hot day and he was oppressed by the idea of de Courchamps as a father.

D'Othmar divined his feeling.

"You know," he said suavely, "the privilege of becoming a father is somewhat unlimited."

"And what about a grandfather?" asked a voice behind them.

Sir Charles turned round hastily: his nerves were still ajar. "Good heavens, Walter, how you startled me," he cried testily.

"Capital," Lord Walter Stuart rejoined cheerily. "Do you a lot of good. But I want to hear d'Othmar's views on grandparents. How are you?" and he shook the Frenchman's hand heartily.

"I am very well," he answered, "although, alas! I am not a grandfather."

"That's a mistake," said Lord Walter. "Believe me, it's a great mistake, an enormous mistake."

"My dear Walter, don't be so infernally pleased with yourself," said Sir Charles, whose equable temper was still somewhat ruffled.

"And why shouldn't I when I have such excellent cause therefor?" Lord Walter gayly demanded. "Come along to Deerham House and see. It's just luncheon time."

"And my goddaughter's birthday," said d'Othmar.

"Oh, then, that's why you are here," Sir Charles exclaimed.

"Precisely. I have not seen her since they all stayed with me in France two years ago, and from her last photograph I gathered that she was distinctly worth looking at."

"So she is! so she is!" said Lord Walter, "and then there are the boys. Such sturdy, jolly little chaps. Come along and look at them."

D'Othmar and Sir Charles rose.

"And the duchess is as devoted to them as ever?" the Frenchman queried.

"Oh, she worships Violet—wants to have her with her all the time: but she doesn't think so much of the boys. Great mistake, you know. Violet's a pretty little girl, but the boys, you know——"

"Are your grandsons," Sir Charles interrupted. "Keep them, my dear fellow, keep them, and leave us our Violet."

. . . . . .

They found that the party at Deerham House had already gone into luncheon, so they followed them into the dining-room.

"*Mon cher duc,*" cried the duchess as she rose and came quickly towards him, both hands outstretched. "We thought you had forgotten us."

D'Othmar bent to kiss her hands.

"*Chère madame,*" he said, "there is but one subject upon which my memory excels yours, and that is—yourself."

"Oh, Helen never thinks of herself," the Duke of Deerham interrupted as he too greeted d'Othmar warmly, "and the worst

of it is, she won't let me do it for her. What will you have to eat?"

D'Othmar, however, was bending over the chair of a very lovely woman seated near the centre of the table. He was not thinking about food.

"Still wearing the angel's colour," he said, as he lightly touched the blue chiffon of her gown.

Alice Stuart laughed.

"I knew you were coming, monsieur, and I wished to keep up my reputation in your eyes."

"Have you lost it—in others?" he queried.

"Ask Dick," she answered, and the look she turned towards her husband, the glance with which he met it, was reply enough.

"No," said d'Othmar, and he took possession of a chair beside her, "why waste my words when I can talk to you?"

"You had better eat your luncheon," the duchess put in somewhat peremptorily, "or you won't get any. It's long past two, and the children's midsummer tree begins at half-past three."

"And what is a midsummer tree?" asked Sir Charles.

"One of the duchess's devices for spoiling Violet," Dick Stuart responded.

"There you are wrong," said the duchess. "I never attempt either the too impossible or the too possible; that is why I *don't* spoil Violet, and I *won't* spoil you."

"And yet," Dick answered, as he helped himself largely to lobster mousse, "I have given you all sorts of opportunities."

"They have never reached me," the duchess answered. "Alice has intercepted them all," and she smiled across the table at the lovely face opposite.

"It's so nice to spoil Dick," his wife said apologetically, "he does enjoy it so much."

"Is that a reason?" Sir Charles queried. "If so——"

"Of course it's not a reason," the duchess interrupted. "How, looking at Alice, as you have consistently done since you sat down to luncheon, can you expect her to be logical. Neither Nature nor her dressmaker have given the slightest warrant for any such expectation." Every one laughed, including

Alice herself. She also blushed, and suggested that the children would be waiting for them.

"That," said the duchess, "is more than probable, and the younger generation resent waiting. They do not realise how much time they have before them."

"I suppose every one likes to waste their own time in their own way—even children," Sir Charles remarked reflectively, "other people's ways always appear so dull."

"Yes," said the duchess, "cigarette smoking appears an absurd waste of time to those with no taste for tobacco. I think, Alice, that we will go upstairs and leave them to smoke alone." She rose as she spoke and moved towards the door, but when she reached it, she turned and looked back at the smokers.

"Don't be long," she said, "or Violet will be angry."

"It appears that my goddaughter is queen of your household," d'Othmar remarked to the Duke of Deerham, as Dick Stuart closed the door behind his wife and the duchess.

"She is," the Duke answered, "but her rod is a sugar cane, and—she has made my wife smile again. She used only to laugh."

"Ah," d'Othmar said thoughtfully. "Laughter is merely mental effort, but smiles are from the heart."

. . . . . .

Half an hour later, when they went upstairs to the drawing-rooms they found the door of the front room wide open, and through it, just beneath the shadow of the Louis Seize curtains that draped the entrance to the inner room, they saw a vision of a fairy-like figure dressed all in white, with golden curls clustering about her face and falling on her soft white frock. She stood quite still, in dainty dignity, waiting to receive her guests, but as d'Othmar's tall, slim figure passed through the doorway, the carefully composed look on the little face broke up, dimples dented the wild-rose cheeks, and with laughing eyes and outstretched hands the little creature darted forward and threw herself into d'Othmar's arms.

"Godpapa! godpapa!" she cried joyously. "You have weally come. Mother

thought p'waps you wouldn't be in time, but I *knew* you would."

"And you were right, my darling," d'Othmar answered, as he took her up in his arms and kissed her.

"Yes, I *had* to be wight," she said sagely, "because you see, if you hadn't come, I should have cwied so dweadfully."

"What! on your birthday, and in the middle of your party?" d'Othmar queried.

Violet put her head meditatively upon one side.

"Well, p'waps not just *now*," she said slowly; "but afterwards, when evewybody had gone, I would have cwied hard."

"That would have been a mistake, my Bijou: after-thoughts usually are," he answered, and he sighed.

"Why are they?" Violet asked.

Problems, whether psychological or otherwise, are always interesting to the young.

"Because, my Bijou, the present and the future are our assets, but the past is always on the wrong side of our bank-book."

"I have got a bank-book!" said Violet.

"It's the savings bank. I've got quite a lot of money in it. Have you?"

"I'm afraid not," d'Othmar answered, "but I have something else, my Bijou. See!" and he drew a little box from his pocket.

"For me!" she cried.

"For who else? Pearls for my pearl."

The child wrenched off the little elastic band that held the cover of the box in place, and, raising the lid, and pulling aside the tissue paper within, disclosed seven perfectly shaped pearls.

"Oh, godpapa, what a lot! One, two, three, four, five, six, seven," she counted.

"Ah, monsieur, you are much too good to the child," said her mother, who had come up behind them to look over Violet's shoulder at her treasure trove.

"Can one be too good?" d'Othmar queried. "Not to her, I am sure; and she is seven years old to-day, so seven pearls are the toll I owe her. Every birthday a pearl for the added year."

"My dear d'Othmar, her necklace will be worth a king's ransom by the time she is old

enough to wear it," said the Duke of Deerham, who had crossed the room to look at the pearls.

"A king is the creature of a government," d'Othmar answered, "but a queen, such as my Bijou, is the creation of Nature."

"Come and see my tree before the children come," said Violet, tugging at his hand. It was her birthday, and it seemed to her unsuitable that her godpapa should upon such an occasion talk in a fashion she did not understand.

D'Othmar followed her willingly enough. He was indeed her abject slave—a fact of which Violet was well aware.

Hand in hand they passed into the second drawing-room: yet was it a drawing-room, or the hall of some fairy palace? Flowers were everywhere. Roses trailed over the ceiling, about the white pillars, over the walls; and all around the room were rose trees standing in immense china bowls, their roots hidden by moss, upon which lay innumerable little packets done up in white paper and tied with pale blue ribbon. The roses were of different colours, pink in all shades, red, crimson, yel-

low, cream, and in the centre of the room stood one, larger than all the rest, a mass of snow-white blooms.

"My tree—my tree!" cried Violet, as she danced towards it. "Isn't it lovely, godpapa? Did you ever see anything so lovely in all your life?"

"Yes, two things," d'Othmar answered, and he glanced from Violet to her mother as he spoke.

"Well, *I* never did," the child said decidedly; and she turned back to the doorway to greet some youthful guests who were coming across the first drawing-room towards her. D'Othmar's eyes were still fixed upon Alice Stuart as she stood just within the window, talking to her husband.

"She is looking well, isn't she?" said the duchess's voice behind him.

"As lovely and, it seems, as beloved as ever," he answered.

"Yes: Dick adores her," the duchess answered, "and I don't think anything in the world does one so much good as seeing two people as happy as those two."

"And they owe it to you," said d'Othmar.

"Ah, to my Unofficial Secret," she answered. "Do you know, when I heard de Courchamps had married, I almost regretted that I had kept it."

"Let me quote yourself *to* yourself, dear madame," the Frenchman answered. "Regret is a phrase; and you have nothing of which to repent. These two," and in a gesture he indicated Alice and her husband, "are as you have just said, entirely happy, and for de Courchamps—let the past be past."

"It must be," said the duchess, and just then Violet came flitting towards them, her hands filled with little parcels.

"For you, godpapa," she cried, and thrust a packet into his hand as she spoke.

D'Othmar, however, showed no eagerness to open it. It is possible that presents for him had lost their novelty. His slender fingers caressed Violet's golden curls.

> "'The past is as a story told,
> The future may be writ in gold,'"

he quoted, and the duchess said, "Amen."

THE END.

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